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ABSTRACT

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Running Head: BEYOND MODERN RACISM

Ent. Studies

Beyond Modern Racism: Backlash and Brutality on *The Shield*

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Abstract

This paper examines representations of race in popular U.S. culture through a textual analysis of the cable television series, *The Shield*. Significations of modern racism and hegemonic racial ideology are examined. Focusing on the construction of white, black and Latino identities, and relationships among them, ways in which *The Shield* promotes overt racism, including backlash and police brutality against racial minorities, are also considered. Theoretical implications for popular conceptions concerning race and crime are discussed.

Key Words: MASS MEDIA, TELEVISION, RACE, RACISM, BACKLASH, CRIME

Beyond Modern Racism: Backlash and Brutality on *The Shield*

Introduction

Over time, media representations of race exert considerable influence over popular conceptions. Hall (2003) observed that: "...the media construct for us a definition of what race is, what meaning the imagery of race carries, and what the 'problem of race' is understood to be. They help to classify out the world in terms of the categories of race" (p. 90). Studies also suggest that belief systems concerning race influence attitudes concerning crime and punishment (see, e.g., Gilliam et al., 1997).

In popular American culture, television is the dominant medium. Portrayals of police and criminals are a television staple. Therefore, television portrayals of police officers interacting with members of different racial groups presents a particularly useful site for exploring popular conceptions of race and crime.

Against the backdrop of modern racism and portrayals of race in other contemporary media, this paper presents a textual analysis of the cable television police drama, *The Shield.* Finding that *The Shield* goes well beyond modern racism, overtly promoting backlash and police brutality against racial minorities, theoretical implications of this lurch away from civil rights and diversity are discussed.

Theoretical Background

Attitudes toward Race

Modern Racism

For some time now in American society, public expression of racist beliefs has been socially unacceptable (Sears, 1988). Blatantly racist remarks nearly disappeared from the popular media more than three decades ago (Entman, 1992). To many people, facts such as these suggest

that racism may be all but eliminated: "Present talk about race is dominated by debates about the very nature of racism's existence and about what evidence sufficiently proves its persistence in our day" (Dyson, 1993, p. 148). Nevertheless, there are indications many white people continue to harbor racist attitudes. For instance, in a study that cleverly worked around social presentational concerns, Kuklinski and colleagues (1997) determined that 42% of southern whites, and about 10% of non-southern whites get angry at the mere thought of a black family moving in next door.

Modern racism (or *symbolic racism*) refers to an "updated and somewhat veiled" form of negative sentiment against racial minorities (McConahay, 1986; see also, Entman, 1990, 1992; Sears, 1988). Modern racism is characterized by: (1) a diffuse emotional hostility toward racial minorities, (2) resistance to the political demands of racial minorities, and (3) belief that racism has been eliminated—no longer inhibiting achievement by racial minorities. Evidence supports the psychometric validity of McConahay's measure of modern racism and the construct has been accepted widely, albeit not universally (see, e.g., Bobo, 1988; Roth, 1990).

Unlike older forms of racism, modern racism tends to be expressed inferentially, rather than overtly. Overt expressions of racism include the use of racial slurs, suggestions that racial minority groups are inherently inferior and/or deserving of lesser treatment, and support for racial segregation. In contrast, modern racist representations are embedded with premises that reinforce antagonism against racial minorities more subtly. For instance, news accounts exaggerating the frequency of black-on-white crime heighten anti-black hostility; portrayals of successful racial minorities may suggest that affirmative action is unnecessary because racism no longer exists (Entman, 1990; Gray, 1989).

Backlash

In the context of race relations, backlash refers to an exaggerated, hostile overreaction (possibly including violence) by a dominant ethnic group in response to influx or demands by a suppressed ethnic group. Backlash is an overt manifestation extending beyond modern racism. Backlash entered the public discourse in the 1960s to describe resistance by southern whites to anti-segregation policies. Alabama Governor George Wallace's strident defiance of school desegregation efforts by federal authorities is an archetypal symbol of backlash (Sears, 1988).

However, backlash is neither so recent a phenomenon nor is it restricted to whites. A review by Bergessen and Herman (1998) described backlash by Anglos against Irish immigrants in the 1840s, by whites against blacks in midwestern cities between 1915 and 1925, and by blacks against Latinos and Asians in south central Los Angeles, manifesting in riots in 1992. Backlash is, of course, a supremely ugly and unreasonable phenomenon, especially when rising to the level of actual violence. The cause(s) of backlash are not yet fully understood. Bergessen and Herman's (1998) hyper-ethnic succession theory offers one possible explanation. This view posits that rapid social change produces resentment fueling "defensive" prejudice and reactionary collective violence by the dominant racial/ethnic group.

Paradoxically, backlash can sometimes serve as a catalyst toward solidifying and further advancing progress by the suppressed group, i.e., backlash can trigger *counter-backlash.* Counter-backlash occurs where members of the dominant group view backlash by their peers to be so shameful and outrageous, they feel compelled to redress it through structural change. For example, Klarman (1994) argued the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a direct response to southern white backlash. Epitomized by Bull Connor's violent suppression of protests in Birmingham, Alabama, white backlash "sickened" President Kennedy, motivating him to advocate remedial legislation. Interestingly, Wyatt Walker, an associate of Martin Luther King Jr., indicated that

black leaders intentionally chose the time and place of key civil rights protests in order to evoke the most fanatical backlash possible: "We knew when we came to Birmingham that if Bull Connor was still in control, he would do something to benefit our movement. We didn't want to march after Bull was gone" (Klarman, p. 113). Nevertheless, although counter-backlash can mobilize ameliorative action beneficial to the suppressed ethnic group as a whole, there is no guarantee if or when counter-backlash will occur. Moreover, even when counter-backlash does occur, it can never undo the harm already suffered by individuals targeted for backlash.

Race and the Media

A Ritual View of Television Viewing

Suggesting that media consumption is more akin to attending mass than to sending and receiving messages, Carey (1975) proffered a ritual view of communication: "Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (p. 10). Mass media are among the most powerful forces in shaping and maintaining social consciousness about topical and controversial issues (Hall et al., 1978). Like religious rituals, mass media can influence the ways in which people define, confirm and refine their core beliefs:

> In short, contemporary cultures examine themselves through their arts, much as traditional societies do via the experience of ritual. Ritual and the arts offer a metalanguage, a way of understanding who and what we are, how values and attitudes are adjusted, how meaning shifts (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1987, pp. 458-459).

Hegemonic ideologies consist of dominant cultural values that pervade a society so thoroughly, most people take them for granted as established "facts" (Hall, 2003). Television is the main transmitter of hegemonic ideologies, producing stories and characters that symbolize

values of the dominant culture (Kellner, 1987). Television has ideological power in the sense that it has the power to signify people, issues and events in a particular way (Hall, 1982). Watching television often serves to reaffirm hegemonic beliefs most people never think to question.

Hegemonic Ideologies of Race

Hegemonic ideologies include notions about race; mass media are a primary site for their transmission: "The media are not only a powerful source of ideas about race. They are also one place where these ideas are articulated, worked on, transformed, and elaborated" (Hall, 2003, pp. 90-91). One way the media convey hegemonic ideologies concerning race is by depicting racial minorities as primitive characters. For instance, one recurrent character is the *slave-figure*—giving, loving, and child-like, but also unpredictable. When the slave-figure takes the form of a female, she is sexually available and hot-blooded. Another recurrent character is the *native*—savage and barbarous, often prone to traveling as an anonymous member of a tribe or horde. Subtler versions of the native portray a figure that is cunning, treacherous, and deceitful. The *entertainer*, happy to display their innate talent to put on a show for white people, is another commonly portrayed primitive character. In all these characters, primitivism, savagery, guile and unreliability "lie just below the surface" (Hall, 2003, p. 93). In American popular culture, primitive characters may be black, Latino (Berg, 1990), Asian (Nakayama, 1994), Native American, even from outer space—anything but white.

As a source of vicarious experience with other racial groups, television fosters social learning relevant to the formation of racial stereotypes (Graves, 1999). Stereotypes are the "pictures in our heads" we use to navigate and comprehend a complex world, much of which we cannot experience directly (Lippmann, 1922). Cognitively, racial stereotypes are belief systems about attributes characterizing various ethnic groups (Hamilton et al., 1994). Stereotypes can be

self-perpetuating—once adopted, they bias information processing so as to maintain and preserve the existing belief system.

Racial stereotypes may be viewed as a "negative mirror of dominant values" (Berg, 1990). From a psychodynamic perspective, negative perceptions concerning members of out-groups enhancc the value of in-group membership (Hamilton et al., 1994). By conveying negative messages about out-group members, media reinforce the value of membership in the dominant in-group, enhancing in-group members' self-esteem. For instance, Nakayama (1994) observed that unlike old Western movies, "good guys" no longer need wear white hats in many modern entertainment genres: "After all, their status as whites in and of itself is already marking them as 'good guys'" (p. 166).

Because the state holds monopoly power over the legitimate use of violence, unlawful acts of violence are a fundamental dividing line between those people who a part of society and *Others*, i.e., those who are outside of it (Hall et al., 1978). Cultivation theorists argue that media portrayals of violence influence audience members to view the world as mean and more dangerous, attitudes that might cause them to welcome repression in the name of security (Gerbner et al., 1979). Therefore, media portrayals that confound race and violent crime, i.e., that suggest violent crime is a problem attributable to blacks and Latinos, could contribute to white condonation of repression of racial minorities.

Media Portrayals of Race and Crime

Prior research suggests the mass media present a distorted view of race and crime. Local television news presents an accumulation of images suggesting most crimes are violent, perpetrators are overwhelmingly black or Latino, and victims are mainly white. For example, Dixon and Linz' (2000a, 2000b) content studies demonstrated that compared to actual crime

statistics: (1) whites were under represented as perpetrators and over represented as crime victims, and (2) blacks were over represented as perpetrators. Compared to whites, blacks and Latinos were more likely to be portrayed as criminal perpetrators and less likely to be portrayed as victims. Moreover, while blacks and Latinos were more likely to be portrayed as criminals than as police officers or crime victims, the opposite was true for whites. Similarly, Romer et al. (1998) found that: (1) stories disproportionately portrayed whites as crime victims and racial minorities as perpetrators, and (2) the frequency of crime by racial minorities against whites was exaggerated. Gilliam et al. (1997) reported that 78% of the crimes covered were violent (compared to 30% in real life), the frequency of murder was exaggerated, and coverage under emphasized violence perpetrated by whites while over emphasizing violence perpetrated by blacks and Latinos. Entman (1990, 1992) indicated that blacks were more often portrayed as dangerous and threatening. For instance, blacks were more likely to be shown in handcuffs or mug shots. He also found that black-on-white crime received disproportionate coverage.

Studies suggest depictions of race and crime are slanted in other news media as well. Grabe (1999) warned against menacing depictions of black males in television news magazine and tabloid programs: "These portrayals of the African American as armed and dangerous deepen this group's marginalization and perhaps even perpetuate justification for police brutality against African American offenders" (p. 167). Sorenson et al. (1998) found that newspapers gave disproportionate coverage to homicides of white and Asian victims, while under reporting homicides of black and Latino victims. Entman (1994) demonstrated that network television crime stories involving a black defendant were more likely to involve violence or drugs, and less likely to emphasize the merits of the defendant's case.

Studies of fictional television programs suggest that compared to the population, whites are over represented, Latinos are very under represented, and blacks are represented proportionately, but also less favorably. An analysis of prime-time television characters from 1966-1992 demonstrated that blacks began to appear at a level commensurate with their share of the population starting in about the mid-1980s (Greenberg & Collette, 1997). However, Latinos and Asians remained very under represented. A follow-up study indicated a similar trend for the Fall 1996 season: blacks were proportionately represented, Latinos were very under represented (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Blacks were disproportionately portrayed as lazy and less worthy of respect; Latinos were generally portrayed in a positive light.

Research concerning depictions of race and crime on fictional television has yielded mixed results. Tamborini et al. (2000) found that character roles and attributes were similar across race in fictional programs concerning the criminal justice system. Such programs tended to over represent whites, under represent Latinos, and give proportionate representation to blacks. Mastro and Robinson's (2000) content analysis of primetime television programs in the Fall 1997 season revealed that perpetrators were 86% white, 5% black, 7% Latino and 2% Asian Theses figures over represent white, Latino and Asian perpetrators, but under represent black perpetrators (Fox & Zawitz, 2002). They also found fictional police were more likely to use extreme force when arresting young male members of racial minority groups. Potter et al. (1995) reported that fictional television under represented the proportion of black perpetrators and victims of serious crime. Gray (1989) argued that fictional television presents a bifurcated image of blacks that is misleading; a successful middle class reifying the myth that hard work can erase discrimination and poverty is juxtaposed against a poor black underclass portrayed as a social menace that must be contained.

A Textual Analysis of *The Shield*

The Shield is a fictional police drama that premiered on the FX cable television network in March 2002. The series focuses on the Strike Team, an anti-gang detective unit, and is set in Farmington, a fictional high-crime district of Los Angeles. Like many other forms of popular culture, *The Shield* is permeated with modern racism—messages that inferentially promote hostility against racial minorities. However, *The Shield* also takes racism much further, framing backlash and police brutality against racial minorities as reasonable. This study analyzed the 13 one-hour segments comprising the first season.

ThePlayers

The main character on *The Shield* is Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis), leader of the Strike Team. Vic is both a hero and a villain; a decorated officer who is thoroughly corrupt. Vic and the Strike Team commit murder, armed robberies, cocaine trafficking and assaults. They also torture suspects and plant evidence to frame innocent people. Vic's chief sidekick on the Strike Team is Shane Vendrell (Walton Goggins). Vic, Shane, and the other two Strike Team members, Lem and Ronnie, are white.

The lead female character on *The Shield* is Claudette Wims (CCH Pounder), a detective. Claudette is highly intelligent, scrupulously honest, no-nonsense, and unflappable. Although responsible for solving many heinous crimes, Claudette prefers to stay out of the limelight, believing that: "Credit is over rated." Claudette is eminently reasonable; her character is often used as a vehicle for conveying broader social messages. Claudette is black.

The Farmington precinct is headed by Captain David Aceveda (Benito Martinez). Aceveda is handsome, articulate, and a graduate of University of Southern California. Highly

suspicious of the Strike Team, Aceveda has repeatedly tried but failed to make a case against them. Aceveda is Latino.

In the sections that follow, I separately discuss examples of how *The Shield* represents modern racism, as well as conduct far beyond.

Modern Racism

Representations of race consistent with modern racism are signified throughout *The Shield.* Embedded premises subtly promote hostility by whites against racial minorities by suggesting that: (1) whites are more powerful than racial minorities; and (2) underclass racial minorities are primitive, dangerous and dirty.

Criminals portrayed on *The Shield* generally conform to stereotypical images. For instance, the Strike Team's partner in the cocaine business was a recurrent black caricature named Rondell Robinson. Rondell wore sneakers, football jerseys, and a huge necklace with a five-inch diamond-studded medallion of his initial: "*R.*" Rondell was greedy, not very bright, carried a pistol, and had a network of street dealers working under him, all of whom were black. Eventually, Rondell threatened to expose Vic. T.O. (also black), one of Rondell's lieutenants, paid Vic $50,000 for permission to kill Rondell and take over his cocaine territory. Consistent with racial stereotypes, this plotline reaffirmed notions that: (1) blacks are unreliable and treacherous, and (2) whites are powerful.

In one episode a Latino accused the Strike Team of police brutality. Vic laughingly denied the charge, referring to the complainant as: "A piece of shit drug dealer." Later, Vic paid a "friendly visit" to the complainant's inner city home, where chickens scratched around a broken-down automobile in the yard. Vic's threat was heeded; the complainant dropped the

charge. Again, the plotline suggested whites have power to which racial minorities (who are filthy) must submit.

Blacks and Latinos were also portrayed as more dangerous than whites. Extreme force was typically used to arrest racial minorities; white suspects almost always surrendered without resistance. When a Latino gang member was shot, Vic asked the witness: "Is it Blacks, Chinese, Los Mags [a Latino gang], who we talking about?" The implication being the perpetrator could not possibly have been white. Moreover, while *The Shield* repeatedly portrayed blacks and Latinos brandishing guns, the entire first season portrayed only one white civilian (someone other than a police officer) in possession of a firearm (although crimes involving a firearm were verbally attributed to other whites). The white gunman was from Armenia and did not speak English. He wore a robe, long hair and beard reminiscent of Jesus Christ. Later, he smiled incessantly after snapping his cellmate's neck. He even had a foot fetish. Indeed, Aceveda stated: "He's special kind of crazy," to which Claudette replied: "Very special." The strong implication was that any white person who commits a crime is extremely atypical.

Although Aceveda putatively is in charge, Vic routinely ignores and scoffs at his orders. Indeed, Aceveda's overall impotence as a police captain was symbolized in one episode by inability to perform sexually with his wife. Frustrated at his inability to govern Vic, Aceveda asks Claudette: "So he's bulletproof, huh?" Always the realist, Claudette replies simply: "For you, yeah." The Latino is impotent in the face of white power; the wise black lady knows this and suggests he accept it.

White cast members of *The Shield* acted out all three elements of modern racism: hostility toward racial minorities, resistance to the demands of racial minorities, and denial that racism still exists. *The Shield* is saturated with hostility toward racial minorities, both overt and

inferential. A few of the more outrageous examples are discussed below in connection with police brutality and backlash. Inferential hostility is more subject to interpretation—where some see an inference of racial hostility, others might see overt racism or no hostility at all. One possible example occurred when Shane learned a Mexican gunrunner was in town: "You gotta let me go undercover and clean up this grease stain." Another possible example occurred when Vic and a Latino detective argued about the best way to get information from a Latino gang member. The Latino detective insisted: "If you treat them like people, it works." Annoyed by this suggestion, Vic countered: "So does treating them like the killing, dealing, thieving scumbags that they are." In both instances, the hostility was apparent; whether it was racially motivated is more or less subject to interpretation.

Resistance to the demands of racial minorities was also apparent. In one episode, a Latino civil rights leader pressured police officials to release to the press a composite sketch of a white man suspected of killing Latinos. Vic argued releasing the sketch would be counterproductive: "That thing is so vague, every Anglo walking down the street is gonna look like a suspect." The Latino leader replied: "Now you know how we feel everyday." Vic's response was sarcastic and dismissive: "Please, save it for the microphones." After the Assistant Chief (who was white) decided to release the sketch, Vic complained to him privately: "Since when do we cow-tow to the Mexico-first crowd?" The Assistant Chief replied: "Have you looked around this city lately, he's the majority now.... We're dinosaurs, Vic, and make no mistake, the meteor is coming." Hence, not only were minority demands portrayed as illegitimate; the "real" ulterior motive was rearticulated as civil rights leaders' desire to garner publicity. Latino progress was disarticulated as a threat to destroy the white race.

Denial that racism exists was most notably presented in the character of Claudette. Claudette enjoyed status and respect. Colleagues, including her superior, Aceveda, regularly sought her advice. Over the course of the season, it was disclosed Claudette's whole family is successful: her father is a college professor, one of her daughters is a teacher, the other a journalist. The implication being that if Claudette and her family have made it, there are no social barriers to hinder other racial minorities from succeeding. Indeed, while interrogating a black suspect, Claudette expressly denounced the notion that hardship should be taken into account: "I don't care how right you think you are. I don't care what kind of hard life you had. What you did was wrong, just as wrong as it gets." In other words, black crime does not reflect social conditions in which blacks live; it is simply a matter of personal failure.

Primitive Characters

Primitive minority characters described by Hall (2003) appeared regularly on *The Shield.* For instance, one example of the slave figure was a Latina named Tigre (the Spanish word for tiger, signifying her Otherness). Tigre was the estranged girlfriend of an abusive gang leader, Hector, who committed an armed robbery. The Strike Team stormed Tigre's home to find Hector, only to wind up shooting her brother, Chaco, by accident. To cover their mistake, Vic planted a throw-down weapon on Chaco, exposing Chaco to lengthy imprisonment. Later, the Strike Team learned Chaco was innocent, there merely to protect Tigre from Hector. Lem was posted to guard Tigre from Hector. Almost immediately, Tigre was ready to have sex with Lem. When Lem confessed he was the man who shot Chaco, Tigre grabbed Lem's gun and threatened to kill him. Thereafter, the Strike Team robbed the throw-down gun from a police evidence van and framed Hector for their crime. Grateful to be free of Hector and have Chaco cleared, Tigre

seduced Lem into having sex on her kitchen table. The implicit message was utterly primitive: Latinas are promiscuous and have violent tempers.

The Shield also portrayed examples of Hall's (2003) natives, one set of which involved a riot. The plotline began with two elderly black women found murdered by an intruder. The victims had called 911 more than an hour before their deaths, but police failed to respond. When the 911 tapes were leaked to the press, mob violence erupted. Scores of unruly, anonymous blacks (and only blacks) were portrayed as an angry mob in the night, overturning a police car, throwing gasoline bombs, smashing car windows with a baseball bat, and charging a line of police. The clear inference was that blacks are frightening, savage, and prone to collective violence. Indeed, overturning the police car can be viewed as a metaphorical threat to overthrow civilization. Moreover, the darkness and anonymity reinforced the stereotypical notion there is no way to tell blacks apart—they're all the same.

Hall's (2003) entertainer is another primitive character used on *The Shield*. One example was a fictional NBA basketball player, Derrick Tripp. In town to play against the Lakers, Derrick was caught carrying a handgun without a permit. Rather than arrest him, it was decided merely to delay Derrick long enough to miss the game, allowing the Strike Team to profit by placing illegal bets against Derrick's team. Derrick turned out to be selfish and spoiled. Although earning a gross salary of $15 million, he complained about expenses and charged $150 for an autograph. To kill time, Derrick invited a woman (she was white, signifying higher status commensurate with Derrick's wealth) over for sex: "One of my little L.A. honeys I bang when I'm in town." The Strike Team couldn't believe how beautiful she was; Derrick was far less appreciative: "Adrianna is a par. Got me this one in Seattle.... Birdie!!" Again, the storyline suggested blacks are primitive: childish, promiscuous, and dangerous.

Police Brutality Against Racial Minorities

Far beyond inferences that promote hostility consistent with modern racism, *The Shield* overtly portrays racism, including backlash and police brutality against racial minorities, in a manner rarely seen in modern American popular culture. Perhaps the most shocking depiction occurred when Vic and Shane stopped two black men for questioning. While Vic followed one of the men a short distance, Shane slammed the other man against the side of his car. The man cried out: "I didn't do nothing." Shane sarcastically replied: "Ever, or just in the last 10 minutes, Kunta Kinte? " [A black character from the television mini-series: *Roots,* Kunta Kinte was formerly a prince in Africa who steadfastly refused to accept his role as a slave in America]. Angered by the racially charged remark, the detainee countered: "Suck my dick." Shane kicked the detainee in the crotch and threw him to the pavement. As he lay grimacing in pain, Shane unzipped his pants and urinated on the man's head and chest, yelling: "Suck your what? Suck that you piece of shit!"

Meanwhile, Vic learned the two men did nothing wrong and could offer no relevant information. Upon seeing what Shane was doing, Vic called for Shane to get going. Vic and Shane jumped into their vehicle and fled the scene, leaving the injured man lying in the street. Vic yelled at Shane as he smacked him in the head: "Are you out of your god-damned mind? We're trying to prevent a war, not start one you stupid..." Shane responded: "The guy was being a pain in the ass!" Vic yelled and smacked Shane again. Beyond the brief scolding from Vic, Shane was never charged or reprimanded for this attack. The condition of the victim was never mentioned.

Needless to say, a more sickening act of subjugation is hard to imagine. Nevertheless, *The Shield* disarticulated the act of beating and humiliating an innocent black man into a very

slight transgression—the implication being that Vic's verbal reprimand was sufficient. The meaning of the attack was redefined as significant only to the extent it might trigger a wider response. The victim himself was of no particular importance; the black man's right to human dignity and personal safety was denied.

The Shield disarticulated police brutality against racial minorities into an acceptable means of preempting the danger they presumably pose. A speech by Claudette, explaining the realities of life to Aceveda, summed up this point of view:

> What people want these days is to make it to their cars without getting mugged. Come home from work; see their stereo's still there. Hear about some murder in the barrio; find out the next day the police caught the guy. If having all those things means some cop roughs up some nigger or some spic in the ghetto, well as far as most people are concerned, it's don't ask, don't tell. How do you figure on changing that?

This message is particularly disturbing in several respects. First, it contends that crime is a problem attributable to blacks and Latinos. Second, it advocates that brutality against blacks and Latinos could effectively mitigate the crime problem. Third, it recommends that silent acceptance is the appropriate response to brutality; opposition to brutality is fruitless. Fourth, conveying this message via a dialogue between a black and a Latino suggests minority acceptance of this new world order. Fifth, by including the racial slurs: "nigger" and "spic," it not only dehumanizes these groups, it infers such terms are an acceptable part of social discourse.

Backlash

Plotlines on *The Shield* also portray backlash openly and favorably. The case mentioned above, concerning serial killings of Latinos, provides one example. As the case proceeded, it became clear a white male had executed 13 Latinos in cold blood (albeit he was never depicted on screen in possession of a gun). Vic tracked down the assailant's sister. The sister was an attractive, articulate woman—apparently typical of the white middle class. She explained to Vic her brother's motivation: "You have to understand. This used to be a nice place to live—clean, safe. George just got fed up being surrounded by all the spics. Can you blame him?" The apparent normalcy of the sister, coupled with the fact Vic did not respond, suggests that: (a) when Latinos enter a neighborhood, they ruin it; and (b) violent white response is reasonable.

Another plotline exemplified black backlash against Latinos. In that episode, a black suspect was being questioned for the murder of a Latino and extortion of Latino food vendors. The suspect explained he was innocent because a Mexican gang forced him to leave the extortion racket: "I didn't kill Poncho, alright? … See that's what's wrong with this country. I'm prime example numero uno. Here I am trying to make a serious buck, and then in come these wetbacks, taking away my job." This scene presented racist messages against Latinos and blacks simultaneously: overtly against Latinos for allegedly being "wetbacks" (illegal immigrants) who displace U.S. citizens from their employment, and inferentially against blacks for believing criminal extortion qualifies as a "job."

Aceveda was also the target of backlash. White hostility toward Aceveda was frequently signified by comments made behind his back. Vic derogatorily remarked to one officer: "What do you expect from a quota baby?" [referencing affirmative action policies that helped Aceveda advance]. Shane told another officer: "Aceveda's a waterboy, He can't do dick." In another instance, after Aceveda offered to assist a white detective, the detective stated to Claudette:

"Since when does he get his hands dirty?" In one scene the hostility erupted into open backlash by Vic against Aceveda:

Aceveda: "I'd like your incident report first thing tomorrow morning."

Vic: "Sure. It'll be a couple of days. I got something on the back burner."

Aceveda: "It's not a request. Tomorrow morning."

Vic: "You'll get my report in a couple of days. Maybe a week. You don't like the timetable, you take it up with Gilroy." [Assistant Police Chief, Aceveda's superior]

Aceveda: "I don't have to, in this building, I'm in charge."

Vic: "Well, maybe in your own mind, amigo. But in the real world, I don't answer to you. Not today, not tomorrow, not even on Cinco de Mayo." [Mexican Independence Day]

Vic received no reprimand for his remarks. To disrespectfully resist the Latino's authority was acceptable.

Conclusion

Consistent with other mass media, *The Shield* is embedded with premises consistent with modern racism— veiled hostility toward racial minorities coupled with images that deny racism and the legitimacy of minority demands. However, *The Shield* goes far beyond modern racism, signifying overt acts of racism, including backlash and police brutality against racial minorities, as understandable, necessary, or even reasonable.

The Shield unquestionably has attained a considerable measure of early success. Despite its position on a small cable network, the first season of *The Shield* garnered an average weekly audience of approximately 3.6 million viewers, critical acclaim, and the Emmy Award for its leading man, Michael Chiklis (Poniewozik, 2002). Therefore, the question becomes: how can a program that is so blatantly racist appeal to so many people?

One possibility is that the show succeeds in spite of the racist presentations embedded within—people might be willing to look past the racism because they find the program enjoyable in other respects. It could be that if all the racist messages were excised from *The Shield*, its popular and critical appeal would persist or perhaps even increase. This hypothesis is unlikely to be tested—the power to manipulate content on *The Shield* lies exclusively with its producers, and it seems unlikely they would fix something that isn't broken, commercially at least. Some audience members simply might not recognize any racism. Others might consciously support racism, as long as they can enjoy depictions of it anonymously in the privacy of their homes. Perhaps there is some kernel of truth in all of these possibilities. However, I suggest another factor might be at work, at least for some viewers.

Jameson (1979) argued that all contemporary works of art tap our deepest fantasies about the nature of social life. More specifically, Greenberg and Collette (1997) contended that television characters and storylines might reflect those things our society values most. Television producers succeed when their programming strikes a chord that resonates in viewers' hearts and minds.

The Shield premiered six months after the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. The resultant desire for revenge and fears of further terrorism precipitated a shift in public opinion regarding racial profiling, limitations on civil liberties, and preemptive strikes against perceived security threats. Dramatic events can lead to *moral panic*, public disquiet that fuels a tilt toward an authoritarian consensus, i.e., *iron times* (Hall et al., 1978). *The Shield* can be viewed as a manifestation of the perception that we live in iron times. Kellner (1987) observed that television presents us with myths—tales of redemption that promise the

restoration of order. Perhaps *The Shield* appeals to some viewers, on whatever level of consciousness, by tapping their desire to believe that order can be restored.

Ideological struggle and transformation can include the redefinition of core concepts (Hall, 2003). Law and order traditionally have been regarded as concepts to be achieved in tandem. On *The Shield,* law *and* order has been rearticulated into a choice between law *or* order. Strict adherence to the law leads to anarchy. Willingness to look the other way when the Strike Team violates the lawful rights of racial minorities restores order. Taking the law into one's own hands through violent backlash signifies dissatisfaction with a perceived state of disorder. To the extent *The Shield* reflects and/or influences popular conceptions of race and crime, the meaning of law and order may be an open question.

Television, especially fictional television, does not present firm conclusions to ideological struggles so much as it offers commentary and suggestions (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1987). *The Shield* could promote popular conceptions that the restoration of order necessitates a shift away from respect for civil liberties and diversity. Paradoxically, it is also possible *The Shield* could help trigger a counter-backlash advancing civil rights and affirmative action.

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Big Brother and the T-group: how we might learn from reality television

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Abstract

Big Brother and the T-group: how we might learn from reality television

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In this paper the authors draw out the considerable parallels between the *Big Brother* television format, and those like it, and the Mini-Society and Mini-Economy experiments which developed from Kurt Lewin's T-group methodology of the 1940s and which were used by academics to study social psychology and group dynamics. It is doubted that the originators of the *Big Brother* format were aware of these experiments, but ways of learning both from the academic processes and from *Big Brother*-style television programmes are suggested in the paper.

Big Brother and the T-group: how we might learn from reality television

Over the past few years, so-called 'reality television' has become very popular among viewers, broadcasters and producers. Programmes such as *Big Brother, Castaway, Survivor* and their many imitators have created a substantially new genre of television entertainment, appealing as they do not only to the voyeuristic instincts of the audience but also to the finances of the broadcaster and producer, since they are capable of generating quite low costs-per-hour of production. All of them depend on one single underlying idea: put a group of (carefully-selected) 'ordinary' people together in an artificially isolated environment, and observe how they react to each other and to the tasks and other stimuli that are presented to them by the production team (see for example Burnett, 2000; Ritchie, 2001).

This simple idea seemed quite new to the broadcasters and the programme makers, but to us it had surprisingly familiar resonances. For students of group dynamics the idea of putting groups of strangers together in unfamiliar and isolated circumstances was nothing new. It had its roots in Kurt Lewin's 1946 T-group experiments, and throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s it became a familiar – and increasingly elaborate – means of study. Of course, the academics who used the closed-group technique did not have cameras, VTRs and huge production teams, nor did they ask their participants to stand on poles in shallow waters; but there are sufficient similarities between *Big Brother* and its contemporaries and the T-groups, mini-societies and mini-economies of the second half of the 20th century to make it worthwhile looking more closely at the two phenomena. In this paper we argue that even though reality television of the kind under discussion is presented to us as pure entertainment, it is possible to derive learning and understanding from the form.

Big Brother was devised by John de Mol, of Endemol Entertainment bv, Hilversum, The Netherlands, in the mid-1990s. The idea was that 12 people should be locked up together in a house equipped with 37 television cameras, constantly under the surveillance of a large production team and – for as long as possible each day – of the general television audience as well. The original idea was to make edited highlights of what happened each day as a 'traditional' built television programme of thirty minutes or an hour each day, and also to make the output from the cameras available to audiences through Web streaming 24 hours a day. Subsequent developments enabled several franchisees of the format to broadcast the live output of the cameras on digital satellite television channels for up to 18 hours each day. The inmates of the house are given tasks to perform and a budget for food and drinks, the level of which is determined to some extent by their success in performing the tasks. They remain in the house for a period of nine or ten weeks, and every week viewers vote (through premium telephone lines, web sites or text messaging) to expel one of the housemates from the house. There are numerous variants as to how people are nominated for potential expulsion, but the principle is much the same in every version; the idea is to allow viewers to form the impression of interactivity and participation in the programme's

progress. As a result the producers have less control than they do in traditional programmes over the progress and outcome of the show. *Big Brother* has been adapted for use in 21 countries so far, and Endemol International continues to market the format actively (Endemol, 2003). In the United Kingdom, preparations are under way for the fourth series of the show; there have also been two week-long *Celebrity Big Brothers*, mounted mainly to raise money for charity.

Big Brother is the main object of study for the authors of this paper, but it should be noted that there are now dozens of similar kinds of programmes in preparation or on the air. One earlier experiment in the genre on British television was the BBC's *Castaway 2000*, a somewhat serious venture in which several families were invited to live for a whole year on a remote Scottish island, more or less sustaining their own environment without (much) subsidy from the BBC and under the constant gaze of camera crews, some of whom shared their rugged living quarters. These crews did not use hidden cameras, and there is an interesting discussion, which will have to be pursued elsewhere, about the role and impact of explicit cameras and crews as opposed to the complete isolation of the inmates of the *Big Brother* house under the gaze of hidden cameras and crew. *Castaway 2000* had a supposedly serious purpose, and certainly offered no big prizes (McCrum, 2000). The American format *Survivor* pits people against each other in a jungle or desert island location, and the participants, rather than the viewers, vote each other on or off; the final survivor wins a million dollars (the winner of the UK Big Brother gets just £70,000 [about $110,000, or €100,000]). There are numerous other variations of the format, of which the most entertaining, in the authors' view, was *I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out of Here*, where a number of more or less well-known personalities survived a jungle environment in Australia's North Western territories, and revealed themselves to the part-hidden, part-explicit cameras as rather more endearing than expected.

Although the settings are elaborate and the production teams are enormous – they have to follow the action 24 hours a day and hence at least three shifts are required – the political economy of *Big Brother* is devastatingly attractive to broadcasters and producers. The total cost of production varies from market to market, of course, but the British version is estimated to cost about £10 million ($16 million) overall to produce, including a million pounds for the construction of the house, which is, of course, re-used each year. The programme enjoys numerous revenue streams, all of which are shared between the producer and the broadcaster: there are revenues from telephone interactions, which run into many millions across the production cycle; there are also revenues from web advertising and web subscriptions; there are revenues from text messages sent to and from the programme; there are books, videos and DVDs based on the show, which generate substantial cash. And of course the broadcaster receives enormous sums from advertisers for spot advertising and programme sponsorship, and pays out a considerable amount of these to the production company to license the format and the production itself. No other programme entity in British television history had previously obtained revenue from so many different sources, and for both the producer and the broadcaster it has been enormously profitable, particularly since the costs involved remain relatively modest – and on a per-hour basis even more modest when the 18-hours-a-day streaming transmissions on the digital channel, E4, are taken into account. Individual figures are not released by

Channel Four Television or by Endemol UK, but informed calculations suggest that gross revenues of better than £23 million ($34 million) accrue to the parties involved from the UK transmission alone, against total costs of £10 million.

The title of *Big Brother* obviously refers to George Orwell's book *Nineteen Eighty-four* (Orwell, 1949), in which he envisaged a dystopian future where every movement and thought of the population of the United Kingdom (renamed Airstrip One to mark its role in the constant world wars that were being waged) was observed by a closed-circuit television system; Big Brother was the ruler of the nation, but he often spoke directly to individuals through television screens. Endemol's Big Brother also observes minutely everything the inmates of the house do and say; and he speaks to all of them (usually, though not always, in a female voice) through loudspeakers fitted in the house, as well as on a one-to-one basis in the 'diary room', to which inmates are either called or may ask to enter. Orwell's book was clearly de Mol's starting-point for the development of the format, and there is no evidence that he had any knowledge of the T-group movement or of the mini-economy environments used by group dynamics students in the 70s and 80s. Yet the format is strikingly close to those environments, which pre-date Big Brother by up to fifty years; so it is worth looking a little more closely at the way the T-group and the mini-society developed in the academic community.

Much of the theory underlying T-group practice developed out of the work of the American social psychologist Kurt Lewin, and the accidental 'discovery' or 'invention' of the T-group in the course of a residential conference on intergroup relations organised by Lewin and his associates in 1946. The participants met in small groups to explore problems relating to employment legislation through group discussion and role-play. Meanwhile data on participants were being collected by non-participant observers in the discussion groups, in order to test how far conference experience would affect participants' actions after the event. The observers met with the discussion group leaders during the evening to review findings. One of Lewin's associates describes what followed:

> 'The evening meeting was planned originally to include only staff members. Some participants, who were living on campus, asked if they might attend, and after some staff discussion the meeting was opened to participants on a voluntary basis. The staff had no pre-vision of the effects on the participants of the description and analysis of their own behaviors. Nor had they any clear notion of how they might handle participant and staff reactions to this experience. Actually, the open discussion of their own behavior and its observed consequences had an electric effect on both the participants and on the training leaders. What had been a conversation between research observers and group leaders in earlier meetings was inexorably widened to include participants who had been part of the events being discussed ... Before many evenings had passed, all participants, the commuters as well as the residents, were attending these sessions. Many continued for as long as three hours. Participants reported that they were deriving important understandings of their own behavior and the behavior of their groups. To the training staff it seemed that a potentially powerful medium and process of re-education had been, somewhat inadvertently, hit upon. Group members, if they

> were confronted more or less objectively with data concerning their own behavior and its effects, and if they came to participate nondefensively in thinking about these data, might achieve highly meaningful learnings about themselves, about the responses of others to them, and about group behavior and group development in general. At this time, no thought was given to the exclusion of other content, whether in the form of cases suggested by the staff, situations reported by members from outside the group, or of role-played incidents. Initially, the notion was to supplement this there-and-then content with the collection and analysis of here-and-now data concerning the members' own behaviors.' (Benne, 1964, pp. 82-3)

A decision was made to hold another conference in the following year, where the newly-discovered method of groups focusing on their own activity was built into the programme. The success of the 1947 conference led to the setting up in Bethel, ME, of the National Training Laboratories (later the NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science), which became an important centre for the development of experiential learning programmes in group dynamics and communication. Although Lewin died before the 1947 conference, his associates acknowledged the influence which his ideas and values about 're-education' had on what became known as the T-group (see Benne, 1976).

During the 1950s and '60s the use of the T-group spread across the USA and Europe. In the UK, its use was pioneered in business schools and departments of management, notably the University of Leeds Department of Management Studies. In 1964, *New Society* published an article by Peter B. Smith (then of the Leeds department) in which the T-group was hailed as a 'recent radical innovation in industry' which had led one major multinational company to make changes that covered 'not only modifications in the way those trained performed their jobs, but also revisions in organisation structure, budgeting and control procedures ... and even some technological aspects' (Smith, 1964). The association of T-group methods with the values of capitalism, strengthened perhaps by the individualistic focus of much T-group activity, led to their being regarded as a reactionary force by many in the labour movement, and militated against their adoption by those working for radical social and political change, despite the intention behind Lewin's legacy.

During the mid-1960s, members of the Leeds Management Department were also instrumental in the setting up of the Group Relations Training Association (GRTA), a national network of professional trainers which promotes the development of the theory and practice of experiential groupwork and which continues to run an annual T-group laboratory. However, by the mid-1970s the T-group had fallen into disfavour with many industrial trainers, who turned increasingly to methods based on a skills model and with more specific behavioural objectives, or to training programmes involving more 'structured experience'. The marketing of manuals for training of this kind is big business across several continents. One of the best-known examples of a training manual setting out 'structured experiences' and sold world-wide is Pfeiffer's *A Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training* (ten volumes published annually between 1975 and 1985), where, for example, trainees learn communication skills through participation in a simulation of a business meeting, or are set problem-solving exercises in groups.

Where models resembling the T-group have been retained in industry, they tend to have evolved away from 'stranger' T-groups to include individuals who already work together in the same firm or department and are structured towards the achievement of specific goals of organisational development. An approach currently favoured by industrial trainers is 'outdoor management development', where participants learn qualities of leadership and survival by scaling mountains, abseiling up cliff faces or enduring the rigours of assault courses. In terms of content, it could be any number of contemporary *Survivor*-style reality programmes; and the earlier manifestations of the T-group described above bear considerable likeness to the underlying concept of *Big Brother*, particularly if one compares the evening 'review' of the original T-group with the nightly wrap-up programmes on television such as *Big Brother's Little Brother*, some of which include discussion with previously-evicted housemates.

Gunnar Hjeholt, a Danish social scientist, takes the credit for the development of the mini-society laboratory design, which in turn had its roots in the T-group laboratory. He described his intentions as follows:

> 'In 1968, I started an experiment which I called the mini-society and which continued into 1969 and 1970. The experiment grew out of my work in sensitivity training, but I suppose for myself it was chiefly an attempt to find a better understanding of the psychological and sociological motivating forces that lie beneath the problems of our present life in our society.' (Hjelholt, 1972, p. 140)

Gurth Higgin, who was for some years a member of the staff of the Tavistock Institute as well as an active pioneer of T-groups within GRTA, collaborated with Hjelholt in the organisation of the 1970 mini-society. He says that the aims of this event were to:

> 'create a society in miniature, where the participants are confronted with other relevant groups from our ordinary society. [This situation] ... gives the possibility for investigating and experimenting with social roles in the small group as well as in the bigger society. We believe that this process of confrontation will make the participants more open to the forces at work in this temporary society and thereby enable them to work constructively with the problems of ordinary society.' (Higgin, 1972, p.646)

Elsewhere he states that:

> 'The mini-society is a fairly large population in a laboratory setting, which as far as possible contains a wide cross-section of society as a whole. The procedure is group-based, but on groups whose members are sociologically similar. The interaction of the groups living together over time produces a good deal of insight on the dynamics by which society as a whole operates. People in mini-societies also tend to find, act out and become aware of preoccupations of the larger society that they bring with them ... For an objective analyst to point to ... problems in the modern world is one thing, but for the members of a mini-society to discover ... for themselves through their own inter-group and personal relationships is a much

> more powerful message, and provides much more understanding of what these phenomena really mean.' (Higgin, 1976, pp. 18–19)

The mini-society approach reflects the concern of some adult educators and trainers who have been convinced of the value of experiential methods but have been critical of the T-group's tendency towards an individualistic focus. They were also concerned at the exclusion of the exploration of such issues as socio-economic differences between group participants because of the concentration on the here-and-now. Another attempt to adapt T-group settings to allow for inter-group tensions and conflicts to be explored and examined is exemplified in the 'Street' laboratory, developed by Steve Potter, an associate of Gurth Higgin and formerly one of the authors' graduate students. In the 'Street', there are fixed boundaries in terms of starting and finishing times and physical location, but interaction is otherwise unstructured. The method is described fully in Potter (1981).

In the 1970s, Hjeholt and Higgin's mini-society experiments tended to have outcomes which emphasised the class differences between the participants; this to some extent reflects the preoccupations of the time, since many social researchers in that period were particularly concerned with issues of social class. There is no doubt that in the nineties and the 2000s *Big Brother* also emphasised some of the class differences between the participants in the various programmes. Sometimes, the 'villains' turned out to be the upper-class members of the household – in a notorious episode in the first British series of *Big Brother*, it was 'Nasty Nick', an upper-class product of the English private school system, who was caught cheating and ignominiously expelled from the household. But because today's social preoccupations are different, issues such as ethnicity and sexuality seem to be more emphasised by the contemporary programmes. Runner-up in the first British series was a lesbian former nun; winner of the second series was a gay flight attendant, although the winner of the third series was a heterosexual white woman whose main interest was in fitness and health. It will become apparent that the experiments which developed out of the mini-society in the 1980s emphasised financial aspects of the differences between participants – which is not surprising in a decade in which money, Wall Street and wealth creation were among the main social preoccupations.

In 1985, one of the authors of this paper, together with a colleague, Jim Brown, set about developing the mini-society process. Their intentions in creating their Mini-Economy event are described in Miller and Brown (1985). They wanted to exploit the powerful potential of the 'cultural island' of the laboratory for producing insights into social behaviour, and creating possibilities for experimentation, but they wished to avoid their event becoming a 'Fantasy Island', by importing real-life economic and social inequalities into the microcosmic reality of the event. They were also anxious to draw in a wide range of participants, in terms of income and occupation, and so they created a fee structure for the event wherein each participant paid to attend the weekend according to his/her real-life income, the fees ranging from £10 ($16) for those on very low incomes to £75 ($110) for high earners or those sponsored by their organisations. The economic differences between participants, they felt, should be mirrored in the economic structure created within the event. At one stage they considered upending the economic pyramid and making the real-life rich poor within the event and vice versa, but abandoned this idea as it seemed to them

that this device might encourage role-playing or fantasy enactment rather than the exploration of processes and behaviour with clear relevance and implications for real life.

They created a currency, called the Bongo, for the event, and on arrival each participant was issued with a cheque book and allocated a daily allowance of Bongo units to match what s/he had paid as a fee, so that participants who had paid £75 were given 75 Bongos a day, those who had paid £55 received 55 Bongos a day, and so on. The daily allowance could be used to purchase such basic resources as meals, bedroom accommodation, tea and coffee, alcoholic drinks and use of the toilets. The community would be faced with the problem of how to deal with the fact that some individuals would not have the resources to afford a bedroom while others would have enough resources to exist very comfortably, and of how to reach decisions about, and implement, changes in the economic structure. Compare the rich-house/poor-house divide in recent editions of *Big Brother*, in which housemates are obliged to live either in luxury or in barely-adequate accommodations with basic food and drink.

At the outset of the event there were advertised various jobs, to enable participants to supplement their basic income by becoming, for example, bank tellers, tea and coffee sellers or toilet cleaners. Prices were arranged so that someone receiving 45 Bongos a day would have enough to buy a bed in a dormitory, three meals, four cups of coffee and a couple of drinks in the bar. As it turned out, of those who attended, roughly half had an income above 45 Bongos and could therefore live above subsistence level, while the other half received less than 45 Bongos and therefore faced some form of economic hardship. Approximately one-third of the participants received 75 Bongos a day, their position contrasting starkly with that of the three 'paupers' on 10 Bongos a day.

The event ran from 5:00 pm on Friday to 4:00 pm on Monday. The only predetermined features of the event were two large group reviews each day, which were intended to allow for reflection on the process and experience of the event, and fixed meal times and bank opening hours. The organisers were anxious to set the right tone for the event at the outset, and debated at some length what was the most suitable way to induct participants into the microcosmic reality of the event. They set up a 'customs post' at the entrance to Beechwood College, where the event was being held, in order to signal to people as they arrived that they were entering a new 'state'. Again, compare the physical arrangements separating the enclosed world of the *Big Brother* house from the 'outside'. Three participants had written to the organisers beforehand requesting bursaries to enable them to attend, and these were given on condition that they arrived before 5.00 pm on the Friday in order to perform some work for the 'state' before the beginning of the event. One of these people was an unwaged actor, who took on the role of customs officer with such enthusiasm and conviction that several people arrived at the check-in desk where they received their cheque books and bank statements in a state of extreme discomfiture.

The organisers also discussed the question of the extent to which it was desirable to make the economic divisions overtly apparent by organising meetings of income groups (for example, bringing together all those on £75), but decided that they did not want to 'over-determine' what happened. They were anxious to replicate real life as far as possible, and to

ensure that low income and high income participants identified one another at the outset would be less realistic than to allow these groups to sort themselves out informally.

At the opening meeting participants took turns to give their names, to say where they came from, and to name those individuals with whom they had pre-existing relationships. There followed a 'hands up' session where anyone could ask a question of the assembled community by asking all those who wanted to be rich, had a private income, earned over £20,000 a year, were socialists, etc, to raise their hands. This exercise was intended to provide an opportunity for individuals to get some sense of the community of which they would be part for the next three days, but it seemed that little of the demographic information generated was retained by participants. Certainly evidence emerged in the course of the event which suggested that some significant relationships remained invisible for the duration of the event.

The flavour of the weekend was captured neatly in a description of what happened given by one participant shortly after the event: 'During the first 24 hours we managed to condense five centuries of social change; we lived through capitalism, revolution, socialism and feudalism'. Some of the events that took place during the four days of the Mini-Economy were striking. Participants divided almost immediately into groups of one kind or another. Realising their inability to pay for basic needs, one group planned to offer 'Golden Fingers' massages. On Saturday morning, a group calling themselves the Kitchen Occupation Group took over the kitchen and dining rooms, demanding the redistribution of wealth in the community. Subsequently they served a free breakfast to all through the dining room window. Another participant called a meeting of the whole community (later to be known as the People's Assembly) to discuss how to respond to the kitchen takeover; they then decided to support the kitchen occupation. That afternoon, yet another group, called Bedlam Inc, bought the franchise to all the bedrooms, and then opened them up free of charge to all. By Saturday evening, participants were addressing each other as 'comrade'. But when the bar opened that evening there was an announcement from the (real) kitchen staff at Beechwood College that they were no longer prepared to serve meals to participants until they did some 'real' work around the building. Their slogan was 'the feeders are the leaders', and they referred to themselves as 'the Lords of the Kitchen'. Two participants were recruited to organise a work schedule; anyone who refused to work would be refused meals. By late Saturday night, the organisers were appointed king and queen by the kitchen staff, and other participants named as queen mother, bishop and high priestess. On Sunday, there was a May celebration involving fertility rites, and a high table was arranged for the aristocracy. At the same time, women attending a women's group meeting received their meals on the grounds that attending such meetings constituted work. All in all, it would have made a wonderful reality television programme.

The model of reflection put forward by Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) stresses 'attending to feelings' as an important stage of the process of reflection. What is not conveyed in the above account of the Mini-Economy is the extreme emotion which was generated in the course of the event. Tape recordings were made of the twice-daily review sessions, which bear witness to the anger, frustration, excitement and exhilaration expressed by participants at various points in the weekend. After the event, once they had caught up on

their sleep, the organisers began to seek theoretical frameworks for understanding what had transpired. One of the organisers wrote, closer to the time of this event:

> I was mopping up the emotional debris which washed around my household for weeks afterwards, since relationships between various of my friends, including several of the people with whom I then shared my house, had been badly fractured as a result of incidents during the course of the Mini-Economy ... I have wondered long and hard about the ethical implications of this painful piece of experience. Certainly I think that it is too glib to say that adult learners in an event like this are 'autonomous', and that therefore trainers can and should take only limited liability for what happens to people during and after intense laboratory experience. I think that the Mini-Economy made me understand better than I did beforehand why a number of early exponents of the T-group extolled the desirability of 'stranger' T-groups. Gurth Higgin told tales of scouring Europe to find groups consisting of people he did not know. (Miller, 1989, p.205)

This invokes some of the issues of ethics which arise out of programmes like *Big Brother*. The responsibility of the organisers/producers for the emotional health of the participants generates considerable discussion whenever such enterprises are debated (see, for example, Ritchie, 2001, pp 279–281). In fact, *Big Brother*'s producers provide professional counselling and other psychological support services to all participants in the programme, both during their stay in the house and afterwards (Bazalgette, 2003) – something which the organisers of the original Mini-Economy could not have been expected to fund.

There are some items of detail from the narrative of the Mini-Economy which are worth emphasising. For example, the Kitchen Occupation Group was not made up entirely of low-income participants, as some assumed at the time, but consisted of several high-income men (whose relative youth and 'alternative' subcultural style suggested poverty to some of their fellow participants) and some low-income women. Perhaps there are parallels here with the French and Russian Revolutions, where revolutionary action was initiated by middle-class activists working in conjunction with members of the oppressed working class (see Davies, 1962). At the time, the interpretation given to the actions of the privileged men was that they were setting themselves up as revolutionaries in order to increase their sexual attractiveness to the women amongst the lower orders. These men, after all, had sufficient resources to enable them to have bought breakfast for the entire community, but presumably playing roles as benefactors or philanthropists constituted a less romantic option than that of becoming working-class heroes.

One of the participants was a Kenyan who had been living in his home country at a time when a military coup took place. He drew some parallels between his experiences in Kenya at that time and some of the incidents during the early stages of the 'revolution' in the Mini-Economy. He said that his first indication of an unusual state of affairs after the Kenyan coup was the fact that the early morning radio programme consisted of music rather than a news broadcast, and said that the conspiratorial tone of people's voices in the bathroom on the first morning of the event gave him a powerful reminder of the anxiety he had experienced upon hearing the music which replaced the news and which signalled

massive and sudden social change. This man provided another useful insight through his actions during the period of the 'risk economy'. He came to the event knowing no-one apart from one of the organisers. During much of the weekend, he seemed to experience a degree of social isolation; a number of his fellow-participants clearly found it difficult to initiate contact with a black African. While he said that he was used to operating in social settings with a high level of self-sufficiency, he was happy to take the opportunity afforded through the risk bank to try and make some new friends, and did this by offering lessons in Swahili. Generally, this man displayed a heartening degree of confidence in his capability of weathering whatever fortunes fate, or economic structures, sent his way. He explained his philosophical attitude at one point by reference to the fact that he was unsure, until the day before he entered the Mini-Economy, whether he would be a capitalist or a pauper within the microcosm; he had applied to the British Council, which was funding his studies in the U.K., for financial support to attend the event, but had only received confirmation of a grant the day before the event commenced, and had decided that, if necessary, he would finance himself and cope with the consequences of having to survive on a lower income inside the Mini-Economy.

The kitchen workers expressed impatience with what they described as the 'revolutionary posturing' of some of the participants. They said that they had been moved to make their intervention as 'Lords of the Kitchen' after a day spent witnessing the behaviour of those who had invaded the work space of the kitchen, whose interpersonal politics several of the Beechwood staff found deeply offensive. In particular, they expressed anger at the fact that the 'working-class accent' of one of their number had been made fun of by two of the 'right-on politicos'.

All in all, the Mini-Economy provided an emotionally exhausting but exceptionally powerful experience, both for organisers and participants (and kitchen staff, of course). But the emotional experience was only part of what was intended. The deep intention of the Mini-Economy was not only to create economic microcosms but also to challenge the perceptions and assumptions of the participants. Among that which was revealed was a series of massively different perceptions about sequences of behaviour among participants. In many cases, the speakers were utterly convinced of the 'truth' of their accounts, the accuracy of their decoding of the nuances of behaviour, and their reading of others' histories. The organisers occupied a privileged place in this conversation, as they had gathered a wealth of information about Mini-Economy participants' personal circumstances in the course of their dealings with them before the beginning of the event, and were thus in a position to scotch some rumours and limit the development of mythologies which seemed to be taking root within the temporary community. It is not at all uncommon for such mythologies to grow up quickly in enclosed groups. What was unusual in the scenario described here was that the individuals were able to articulate or confess to their fantasies and assumptions.

Over the course of the six months or so after the event, the organisers talked to or corresponded with at least three-quarters of those who took part. Several people wrote at length about the nature of their own learning. Some commented chiefly on their feelings about the behaviour of other participants, while others sent detailed suggestions as to how

the economic structure might be altered to produce a different outcome, or offered recommendations regarding the practical organisation of future Mini-Economy workshops. There were suggestions of a follow-up review day to share insights and interpretations, but it was difficult to find the financial resources and enthusiasm to make this possible.

It seems clear now that there are (at least) two distinct strands to this work. The first of these is concerned with the development of a model for analysing interpersonal interaction in terms of currency exchanges. There are some doubts about this model. The 1983 workshop employed a methodology which was too unwieldy to be of use in other groups. The value of using the concepts of invasion, deprivation and dialogue to classify types of interaction is questionable; these terms provide limited scope for distinguishing between types of interaction, and are of little use when the relationships under scrutiny are characterised by asymmetry in the first place.

The second strand of this work is that concerned with the creation of a microcosmic community in a laboratory setting. If nothing else, the Mini-Economy shows the value of this type of approach to learning.

When the experience of the Mini-Economy was compared with Higgin's account of his experience as one of the social scientists in the 1970 Mini-Society, it was clear that the two events reflected some very different preoccupations. These are some of the contrasts:

MINI-SOCIETY 1970	MINI-ECONOMY 1985
Key issue seen as social identity and changing social structures	Key issue seen as economic structure and changing economic relations
Organisers view themselves as facilitators and researchers	Organisers see themselves primarily as administrators
The 'generation gap'' is seen as most significant difference between people	The gap between rich and poor is seen as the most significant difference
The main debate is about 'liberation' and 'social responsibility'	The main debate is about 'democracy' and 'authoritarianism'
Change managed through the offering of alternatives	Change managed through overthrow and takeover
Discontent with organisers displayed by ritualistic humiliation by feeding them with gourmet food	Discontent with organisers displayed by starvation and withholding meals

Gurth Higgin's account of the 1970 event illustrates the idea of events of this kind as 'living texts'. He suggests that the members of the mini-society were enacting scripts of eternal significance in groups, as well as giving more obvious 'signs of the times':

> There were bits of the *Hamlet* script, *The Threepenny Opera* script, the *Julius Caesar* script, *The Wandering Gypsy* script, the *Dionysus* script, the democracy-doesn't-work-we-need-a-leader script, and, of course, the any-day-at-home-and-at-work script. (Higgin, 1972, p. 648).

Today he would add that there were also some key bits of the *Big Brother* format. People who have read or heard about the Mini-Economy have also suggested parallels in political theatre as well as in the history of laboratory learning; others have suggested textual readings of the interaction using frameworks drawn from psychoanalysis, Gestalt, and feminist work on mythology. It would not be difficult to tell the tale of a hero's journey through the mini-society, either (Campbell, 1972, 1990; Vogler, 1998).

But it might be argued that a mini-event of the kind described here cannot be read as embodying concerns of a whole society at a particular time, since its participants are 'atypical'. It is true that such an event is unlikely to attract a complete cross-section of people in terms of age, social class, race, occupation and political orientation. Perhaps, as Higgin suggests: '... you have to be pretty liberal, or even radical, to come to such a way-out thing as a Mini-Society.' (Higgin, 1972, p. 651). However, even if the mini-society is dominated (at least numerically) by members of the 'caring' middle-class, such an event can still be analysed as a text of its times, at least to the extent that a novel such as David Lodge's *Nice Work* (1988) can be seen to illustrate themes of importance in Britain in the late 1980s. Lodge's text is, after all, the product of the experience and imagination of one middle-class academic; the text of the Mini-Economy was constructed out of the collective experience and imagination of 30-odd diverse, if eccentric (and mainly middle-class) people.

Questions are sometimes raised about the nature of the reality experienced within events of this kind: 'Isn't what you're describing just a kind of role-play or simulation?' There was some debate about where 'reality' began and ended during the course of the Mini-Economy; one of the participants suggested early on that, during the review sessions, the action in the event should be, in effect, frozen. It was not so much that this suggestion was rejected; rather, it seemed that, as what felt like 'real' behaviour was being enacted, our action simply could not stop and start to order. Higgin concludes his account of the Mini-Society in the following way:

> If it was all only role-playing, it certainly didn't feel like it. But then it doesn't in everyday life, does it? (Higgin, 1972, p. 663).

The learning that can be derived not only from the Mini-Society and the Mini-Economy but also from *Big Brother* conforms to the model of experiential learning described by Kolb *et al* (1971). The model of learning which is embodied in the T-group is illustrated in the experiential learning cycle. Kolb explains the model in the following way:

> The experiential learning model represents an integration of many of the intensive lines of research on cognitive development and cognitive style. The result is a model of the learning process that is consistent with the structure of human cognition and the stages of human growth and development. It conceptualizes the learning process in such a way that differences in individual learning styles and corresponding learning environments can be identified. The learning model is a dialectical one, similar to Jung's (1923) concept of personality types, according to

> which development is attained by higher level integration and expression and modes of dealing with the world. (Kolb, 1981, p. 235)

T-group trainers hold the view that group behaviour needs to be learned about experientially, that is, by engaging in interaction within the group and reflecting on the experience of that interaction. Facilitators in a T-group may encourage participants to move through the experiential learning cycle by drawing attention to behaviour in the group in order to encourage reflection on this behaviour, and by fostering an atmosphere in which experimentation with unfamiliar or unconventional behaviour (such as acknowledging sadness, vulnerability or anger) is permitted. The use of the term 'laboratory' to describe the setting where T-group training is carried out highlights the opportunities which exist in this context for experimentation with unaccustomed forms of behaviour which is seen as an important component of learning.

There is a growing corpus of work on experiential learning, including several recent collections of papers edited by David Boud and his associates in the Australian Consortium on Experiential Education (ACEE) (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985; Boud and Griffin, 1987; Boud, 1988; see also Boud and Miller, 1996). A central theme in the work of the ACEE writers and practitioners is the importance of the theory and practice of reflection in the experiential learning process (see especially Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985). They suggest that a limitation of Kolb's model is its lack of attention to the stage of reflection and observation, and they offer a modification of the experiential learning model, in which the process of reflection is broken down into three stages – returning to experience, attending to feelings and re-evaluating experience.

The originators of the *Big Brother* formats and others like them would not on the whole admit to having a learning objective for their television entertainments. But then television often provides learning even to those who do not wish to learn; this is one reason why we feel study of popular culture is so important, and why the work of groups like the Entertainment Studies Interest Group of the AEJMC can be so valuable. But just as the Mini-Society and the Mini-Economy provided important learning outcomes and some dramatic experiences along the way, so *Big Brother* and programmes like it can provide diverting entertainment – and some valuable learning along the way. For us, while the Mini-Society revealed insights into the class structure of society, and the Mini-Economy provided learning about the effects of economic circumstances on relationships and interpersonal interactions, Big Brother tells us about the *zeitgeist* of the 1990s and the 2000s: issues of sexuality and ethnicity, preoccupations with the body and (particularly in the American versions of the format which we have seen) the contemporary fondness for analysing a situation over and over again are revealed and emphasised. More profoundly, the shifting nature of relationships, betrayals and trust between participants can be seen more clearly in the *Big Brother* format because of the ease with which we can observe what is going on: in the Mini-Society and the Mini-Economy, the insights (but also, of course, the experience) afforded were only available at first-hand to the participants, which is why it was important for them to step back every so often in the review sessions. But apart from this important difference, the similarities between the formats, intentions and outcomes of the academic processes and the television games we have been examining tell us that looking

at *Big Brother* and the rest of them through the experiential learner's eye and with the sociologist's imagination can provide some surprisingly rewarding learning outcomes.

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Hegemony and Counterhegemony in

Bravo's *Gay Weddings*

by

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Hegemony and Counterhegemony in Bravo's *Gay Weddings*

Gay Weddings, a new reality series on the cable channel Bravo, follows four gay and lesbian couples as they plan and subsequently participate in their weddings, or commitment ceremonies. While these couples challenge the heterosexuality inherent in the wedding ceremony, they simultaneously also follow wedding traditions. In this paper, the author examines how the program evidences both a counterhegemony and hegemony within the context of how mass media portray the wedding in contemporary society.

Hegemony and Counterhegemony in Bravo's *Gay Weddings*

On Sept. 2, 2002, a new reality television series premiered on the arts and entertainment cable channel Bravo. "Gay Weddings," an eight-part series of half-hour episodes, follows four gay and lesbian couples as they plan their commitment ceremonies and ultimately "tie the knot" (Bravo Fact Sheet). The show's debut coincided with *The New York Times* announcement that its Sunday editions would begin publishing notices of gay and lesbian unions ("Gay Weddings Go Prime Time," 2002).

Bravo, which claims to be viewed in more than 66 million homes nationwide (Bravo Fact Sheet), was looking for a reality series targeted at adult audiences and had a gay theme, after having had success with previous gay-themed reality programs (Shister, 2002). The cable outlet had approached the production company Evolution Film and Tape in Los Angeles, which specializes in reality programming. Co-creator Kirk Marcolina recalled the wedding of two male friends, an "elaborate production, very theatrical and dramatic. And a lot of drama led up to the day" (Shister, 2002). Marcolina, who is gay, wanted the new show to demonstrate and validate the commitment of same-sex couples ("Gay Weddings Go Prime Time," 2002).

"Gay Weddings," in what Calvert (2000) terms *video verite* style, offers viewers the "fly on the wall" perspective already familiar within the reality TV genre. It joins the cadre of recent reality programming as defined by Consalvo (1998), based on the industry's own definition: "programming that draws on the drama of real events and occupations to attract viewers." The program's production company, Evolution, specializes in reality programming; founder and "Gay Weddings" co-creator Douglas Ross was the executive producer of "Big Brother" on CBS, and "Fear Factor" on NBC (Shister, 2002).

"Gay Weddings " also joins the milieu of recent television shows that center on the wedding, or at least marriage proposal, as a dramatic element within the reality genre. These include ABC's "The Bachelor" and "The Bachelorette," and the recent Fox offerings "Who Wants to Marry a Multimillionaire?," "Who Wants to Marry a Prince?," "Surprise Wedding" (which featured brides-to-be in bridal gowns making ambush proposals to their boyfriends in front of a studio audience), "Bachelorettes in Alaska," "Married by America," and the ratings hit "Joe Millionaire." All these programs assume romance as pertaining to heterosexual couples, often with gender roles securely portrayed with the men making the marriage proposal, even on "The Bachelorette."

The reality series "A Wedding Story" on the cable outlet The Learning Channel presents viewers with actual, unstaged weddings of ordinary couples as they prepare for their wedding day. The Lifetime network, which dubs itself "Television for Women," occasionally presents "Weddings of a Lifetime," also featuring everyday couples, though the weddings in that program often encompass a more glamorous treatment, such as one ceremony that took place at Cinderella's castle in Disney World. Taken together, these mass media accounts reflect traditional cultural elements of the "American" wedding, characterized recently as "big, white, and romantic" in the A & E Channel's two-hour documentary titled, "The American Wedding" (Ellerbee & Tessem, 2001).

As reality programming, "Gay Weddings" offers media scholars a way to study how such programming presents (1) experiences by same-sex couples as they undertake an important, public and social event, and (2) the wedding in contemporary US society. Though the outlet through which the program is disseminated might not equal the reach of the major television broadcast networks, it nevertheless serves as a means by which one can examine how television reflects the culture and mores of modern life, and how "real people" who happen to be gay or

lesbian have similar or dissimilar experiences as heterosexual couples when making their commitment in a public venue.

The wedding in American society serves as the accepted, expected way that two people make their union "official," either legally or emotionally. The wedding as a major ritual serves as an ideal way to study how people make choices in planning for a public display (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2002). As a common, taken-for-granted event, it serves as an example of hegemony, what van Zoonen (1994) characterizes as "the natural, unpolitical state of things accepted by each and everyone" (p. 24). The assumption that weddings, as portrayed in myriad images both experienced by us firsthand and presented in mass media—films, television fiction and non-fiction, magazines—are meant for bridegroom (man) and bride (woman) furthers a hegemonic view of romance and relationships as being heterosexual.

Portrayal of the Wedding Ceremony

In *Recognizing Ourselves: Ceremonies of Lesbian and Gay Commitment*, Lewin (1998) conducted ethnographic research of same-sex weddings, by witnessing the commitment ceremonies of and interviewing gay and lesbian couples. She observed that, "Lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies offer symbolic resistance to heterosexist domination" (p. 234), but at the same time they reaffirm, through the use of wedding rituals, the symbolism of marriage and the need to have a public means by which to signify their relationships.

One baseline against which to analyze the elements present in the weddings or commitment ceremonies central to "Gay Weddings" is what Ingraham (1999) describes as the "stereotypical white wedding," with obvious differences in attire based on sex: "a spectacle featuring a bride in a formal white wedding gown, combined with some combination of attendants and witnesses, religious ceremony, wedding reception, and honeymoon" (p. 3).

One can readily find examples of hegemony regarding the wedding today. The pervasiveness of the wedding industry, which manages to convince consumers that they need an array of special products for the requisite rituals of the ceremony and subsequent reception, manifests itself on the website GayWeddings.com, which links to GayWeddingStore.com. The wedding store site features the typical items one finds at the traditional, heterosexual wedding: personalized champagne flutes, cake toppers (groom-groom, and bride-bride), invitations, and guestbooks.

In the current study, I examine how "Gay Weddings" presents weddings and commitment ceremonies of the same-sex couples it features, using hegemony as a way to explain the appeal of the wedding as narrative. Specifically, I aim to answer the question: What do the weddings in "Gay Weddings" look like, and to what extent do they reflect or contradict the hegemonic view of the wedding ceremony associated with heterosexual weddings?

Portrayal of Common Themes

"The few interpretive studies of heterosexual weddings and related rituals that have been published have not questioned the heterosexist social context in which family relations are negotiated," notes Oswald (2001), in her study of the wedding as social event and the ways in which gay and lesbian family members deal with the inherent heterosexuality of wedding celebrations. In that our ideas of the wedding are implicitly heterosexist, the additional pressures faced by gay and lesbian couples, such as family, not to mention societal, acceptance, present themselves in "Gay Weddings." Indeed, the Bravo channel's own program description of the series points to the additional factors faced by same-sex couples as they plan their commitment ceremonies: "One of the most stressful events any couple can undertake is compounded for these couples by social and political pressures" ("Bravo Fact Sheet," 2003).

Among these is the importance for validation by the couples' family members, a recurrent theme noted by "Gay Weddings" co-creator Kirk Marcolina ("Gay Weddings Go Prime Time," 2002). Weddings in general are family affairs, historically and currently. It is taken for granted that family members will participate in the wedding, either as witnesses or within the actual ceremony itself. Thus, one could consider that part of the hegemonic message within the wedding ceremony is the implicit expectation that family is involved.

In terms of gay weddings, the emphasis on family relationships becomes more significant, as noted by Lewin (1998). Because such unions fall outside legal boundaries and lack the same benefits that accompany heterosexual weddings, "couples who have commitment ceremonies understand these occasions to be about their relationships to their families" (p. 250). Though one's "family" may constitute close friends, Lewin notes, "The absence of relatives may be as marked and emotionally intense as their presence; in either case, both are taken note of and interpreted at length after the fact" (p. 250).

"Gay Weddings" addresses this directly, and thus provides an ideal venue in which to investigate family interaction when the wedding couple is gay or lesbian. Thus, the second question I pose in this study is: What are some of the recurrent themes, besides those typically associated with the ceremony itself, present in "Gay Weddings" that distinguish the same-sex weddings it focuses on from portrayals of heterosexual weddings in other reality programming?

In order to answer these questions concerning the content of "Gay Weddings," a reality-based television program, I review hegemony as applicable to the study of mass media messages, how hegemony has been used to study the cultural meanings evident in the contemporary wedding ceremony, and the counterhegemonic message offered by the program. By examining this specialized program, I hope to add to the current literature regarding the mass media portrayal of weddings in general, of same-sex weddings in particular, and how the expression of

commitment between two people both reflects and transcends the hegemony of sexual orientation embedded in the concept of the wedding as cultural artifact in US society of today.

Hegemony: Application to Media Studies

The term "hegemony" finds its origins in the writing of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who developed a perspective of viewing the political and social order of his native land at a particular time, the early 20th century. Gramsci essentially used the concept to understand and explain how those in power come to power—by the consent of the subaltern, or oppressed communities: "Based on his revisions of the Marxist tradition, Gramsci developed a criticism of the state as a hegemonic superstructure of power" (Zompetti, 1997, p. 72).

This "superstructure" of power, as Lears (1985) points out, involves not a simple model based in a single, monolithic, and pre-devised superstructure, but "a complex interaction of relatively autonomous spheres (public and private; political, cultural, and economic) within a totality of attitudes and practices" (p. 571). Artz and Murphy (2000) take the basic Gramscian concept of dominance within a society and apply it to a more broad definition of leadership, defining hegemony as "the process of moral, philosophical, and political leadership that a social group attains only with the active consent of other important social groups" (p. 1).

Gramsci's notions of power and order lend themselves to application to recent media and cultural criticism as a means of describing not a fixed, abstract concept, but as a continual process which results in commonly held meanings within a society. For example, Dow (1990) refers to hegemony or hegemonic processes as "the various means through which those who support the dominant ideology in a culture are continually to reproduce that ideology in cultural institutions and products while gaining the tacit approval of those whom the ideology oppresses" (p. 262).

Similarly, Cloud (1996) refers to hegemony as "the process by which a social order remains stable by generating consent to its parameters through the production and distribution of ideological texts that define social reality for the majority of the people" (p. 117). Mumby's (1997) take on hegemony essentially echoes these definitions, as it "involves the production of a worldview, inclusive of a philosophical and moral outlook, that is actively supported and articulated by subordinate and allied groups" (p. 348). These groups reside primarily in the realm of civil, rather than political (or what one would think of as "governmental"), namely, "religion, mass media, the education system, the family and so forth" (Mumby, 1987, p. 348). Thus, hegemony finds its strength not in the state in and of itself, but in basically all facets of society.

Media scholars have debated the essence of hegemony in recent years (Cloud, 1996; Condit, 1994). Most notably, because it encompasses the notion of the dominant and submissive (or "consensually oppressed"), hegemony has been referred to in more simplistic terms as "dominant ideology" (Zompetti, 1997; Condit, 1994). However, Condit (1994) reinterprets hegemony as "concordance," which assumes that prominent class divisions, especially in terms of economics, no longer characterize US society (in particular). The difference between the two, explains Condit (1994) lies in viewing "dominant" as either a singular, deliberate entity or the result of pluralism:

> The dominant ideology perspective assumes that a single, coherent dominant group is hiding its interests behind a false portrayal of universality. In contrast, the hegemonic perspective assumes that there must be something universal (or at least general) in any successful claim in order for a wide variety of groups to identify with it (p. 219).

Cloud (1996) argues against Condit, in that "concordance" does not adequately characterize hegemony; rather, Condit's purpose "is to give the term 'hegemony'—previously associated with a negative critique of a dominant and dominating culture—a more positive valence with the term concordance" (p. 117).

The usefulness of other Gramscian concepts comes into play here, most notably that of "common sense"—"when dominant ideology becomes invisible" (van Zoonen, p. 24). Here lies the true essence of hegemony—the "dominant ideology" becomes so inculcated into everyday practices and values regarding social life that we do not even question them. This acceptance, then, serves as the end result of hegemony, as noted by White (1992): "Social and cultural conflict is expressed as a struggle for hegemony, a struggle over which ideas are recognized as the prevailing, commonsense view for the majority of social participants" (p. 167).

Hegemony in Media Messages: TV Programming

Lewis (1992) explains the presence of hegemony in the media: "Hegemony in mediated communication is a process by which one set of meanings is produced regularly and is accepted as credible to the point that it is taken for granted" (p. 179). Additionally, Hardt (1992), citing Stuart Hall, states that the media "function in several ways to maintain their cultural and ideological position...they provide and selectively construct social knowledge, they classify and reflect upon the plurality of social life, and they construct a complex, acknowledged order" (p. 190). Wood (1994) reiterates that the media reflect cultural ideals and values through their various forms of content; they "reproduce cultural views of gender in individuals" and define "normality" (p. 231).

Recent media scholars' analyses of the content of television programming, especially, have applied hegemony to their inquiries. For example, Dow (1996), in her book on women-centered television entertainment *Prime-Time Feminism*, points to the usefulness of hegemony in

interpreting the construction of feminism within network TV programs. While such programs ("The Mary Tyler Moore Show," "Murphy Brown") show "modern" women as career-focused and untraditional, they still emphasize feminine qualities and traditional values expected of women in modern US society—the importance of marriage and motherhood as necessary for women to be happy and complete, juxtaposed with messages that point to the loneliness of singlehood, and the emptiness of being childless. While Dow does not doubt her female students' resistance to the dominant culture, she does question " the quality or power of that resistance in the face of the repetitive and consistently reinforced hegemonic media messages they consume" (p. 18).

While Dow (1996) applied hegemony to the study of entertainment TV programming, Consalvo (1998) specifically used hegemony to frame her research of reality programming. Using Condit's "critique of concordance," Consalvo analyzed how the TV series "Cops" portrays domestic violence. Consalvo concluded that of the voices heard within the program, namely those of the police and domestic violence victims (women), the one dominating the episodes she viewed was that of law enforcement. Essentially, the viewpoint of the cops is dominant because it is the one shown most, with the resulting hegemonic message that perpetrators should be punished and victims should press charges. While one may see Consalvo's findings as obvious, given that the title of the show is "Cops," the program holds the potential to further educate and enlighten viewers about the everyday social issues that the cops encounter by adding a brief follow-up or epilogue to what happens to abusers and victims.

Consalvo's study of 'Cops" as media artifact provides one way to illustrate hegemony as the result of concordance, the notion that within a pluralism of differing voices the ones heard most often "rise to the top." These dominant voices then serve as a representation of a dominant ideology that finds its basis in repetitive messages that have some universal commonality.

Hegemony and Media Portrayals of the Wedding

Until recently, the media treatment of the wedding and its implicitly hegemonic messages has lacked scholarly attention. Geller (2001), taking a feminist approach, examines the history of wedding etiquette and its manifestation in a variety of media channels, notably popular films, in her book on the marriage mystique, *Here Comes the Bride*. She notes, "Because it de facto represents a tradition, no wedding, conventional or innovative, occurs autonomously" (p. 259), pointing to the common-sense, taken-for-granted aspect of hegemony as evidenced in social custom. In her conclusion, Geller notes that in a time when women have the option not to marry, the allure of matrimony remains a mystery. One can use hegemony as an explanation for the still-desired goal of marriage and the perpetuation of the wedding ideal.

In *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, Ingraham (1999) bases her argument that the contemporary American wedding, as targeted to women, on hegemony, though she does not use this specific term. Here, I apply the concept in its fundamental form of the "dominant cultural and political order" (Zompetti, 1997, p. 72) to explain how Ingraham presupposes hegemony when asserting that the white wedding, as we know it today, and marriage, romance, and heterosexuality become so naturalized that as a society, we consent to the belief that marriage is essential to achieving happiness. Ingraham states, "...we live with the illusion that marriage is somehow linked to the natural order of the universe rather than see it as it is: a social and cultural practice to serve particular interests" (p. 120). These interests, according to Ingraham, include the bridal industry, and through them results the maintenance of the status quo in a capitalistic, patriarchal, and heterosexual society.

Ingraham analyzes the traditional white wedding theme in a variety of media, including recent popular wedding-themed films and several prime-time fictional entertainment programs

featuring weddings as storylines. She concludes: "The heterogendered division of labor and heterosexual supremacy are well preserved in television and popular film...," with depictions of the wedding in these mediated versions of "life" discouraging "any critical analysis of how we've organized and regulated heterosexuality as an institution" (p. 157).

While Ingraham explicitly addresses the issue of heterosexism in her analysis, other researchers have examined the specific issue of hegemony in their approaches to studying the message of the wedding. For example, Lewis (1997) used hegemony theory to frame his study of the recurrent images and poses in wedding photographs. He found patterns in wedding pictures that demonstrated hegemony of gender—women (brides) were posed by photographers to nonverbally emanate femininity and subordination to patriarchy.

The reality program "A Wedding Story" on the cable outlet The Learning Channel, which debuted in 1996, served as the focus of Engstrom's (2003) application of hegemony theory to explain how repetitive depictions of weddings in that program reflects certain social norms in contemporary US society. An analysis of 100 episodes led Engstrom to conclude that the show "depicts a world consisting, basically, of white people and white weddings" (p. 13). She notes that even while some of the couples tried to incorporate creativity into the wedding protocol, such as using a historical or cultural theme, their weddings still adhered to cultural and social norms, such as compulsory heterosexuality, women's value as physical objects, and women's reliance on others for wedding expenses.

"A Wedding Story" also served as the subject of Engstrom and Semic's (2002) study of the hegemony of religion present in the program. They viewed 85 episodes of the program aired in 2002 to see how the program depicted religious elements of wedding ceremonies. Their findings demonstrate a dominant portrayal of religion, with most of the episodes including

mention of the word "God," reflecting some form of Christianity, and the recitation of traditionally worded vows based in the Christian rite.

Both studies of the reality program "A Wedding Story" mentioned here point to the exclusivity of heterosexual couples on the show; indeed, no same-sex couples are featured in the series, which adds to the high degree of conformity and homogeneity in the overall impression of weddings the program presents to its (mostly women) viewers. In that reality, though edited to present weddings and marriage in a positive light, serves as the point of origin for the narrative of every episode, one can argue that "A Wedding Story" does in some way reflect at least the middle-to-upper class view of weddings in American society today.

Looking at the research presented here as a whole, what results is a picture of today's "white wedding" (and, pointedly, white in terms of race [Engstrom and Semic, 2002; Engstrom 2003; Ingraham, 1999]) as involving those elements that distinguish it as a stylized social event: formal apparel (such as white wedding gown and tuxedo), the recitation of vows that embody in some form religion and traditionally based wording, a public aspect regarding venue (such as church or reception hall), attendants, and reception including wedding cake and entertainment (such as music and dancing).

Regarding the program examined in the current study, I aim to see how "Gay Weddings" reflects these elements that have become "naturalized" into the modern wedding. I use the term "hegemony" here refers to the continual, repetitive messages created by those (whether the show's producers or its participants) who adhere to a common worldview (based on Dow's 1990 interpretation).

"Gay Weddings" as Counterhegemony (?)

As Oswald (2000) notes, "Our society privileges heterosexual marriage, and thus weddings also link the personal decision to marry with an institutional heterosexual privilege

carrying profound social, legal, financial, and religious benefits" (p. 349). Weddings as noted by Geller (2001) and Ingraham (1999) implicitly reflect heterosexism, the "reasoned system of bias regarding sexual orientation" (Jung & Smith, 1993). Similarly, weddings and their associated "pageantry" further the hegemony of what Adrienne Rich (1980) termed "compulsory heterosexuality." Mackey (2001) cites Rich when she points out that along with wedding pageantry, "romanticized images of heterosexual love and romance that permeate popular media is an example of the forces of 'compulsory heterosexuality'" (p. 102).

Maher (2002) in her observations of the reality based programming line-up of The Learning Channel, including "A Wedding Story" and its subsequent ratings hit "A Baby Story," characterizes the near uniformity of demographics and the total absence of gay weddings as compulsory heterosexuality at its most uniform. "There are no single parents and no gay weddings, commitment ceremonies, or baby stories—this despite the TLC website's claim that the show 'spotlight the wonderful diversity expressed by modern couples'," she contends (p. 54). Similarly, Engstrom (2003) and Engstrom and Semic (2002) also note the underlying hegemony of heterosexuality present in that particular program.

However, Gramscian hegemony as a process that creates meaning exists not a static, closed, or complete system; there is potential for opposition (Brown, 1989; Lears, 1985). As Brown (1989) notes, "the creation of counterhegemonies remains a live option" (p. 571), and same-sex weddings inherently and obviously counter the status quo. As Jung and Smith (1993) argue, the wedding and its rites do not limit themselves to heterosexual unions. Indeed, they contend, "Ample evidence within traditional prayers, blessings, and vows demonstrates that marriage as both a sociological and spiritual estate ... can embrace different sex and same sex unions" (p. 164).

Clearly, "Gay Weddings" offers a counterhegemony to the dominant portrayal of weddings upholding the hegemony of compulsory heterosexuality. However, the wedding, and thus any commitment *ceremony*, by nature finds its basis in tradition that in turn originates in some socially historical endorsement of accepted practice and values. According to Lewin (1998), "Even as conventions are overturned in these ceremonial occasions, they are reinscribed and reinvented; by arguing that they don't need the trappings of legal marriage, couples simultaneously demand access to analogous symbolic resources." Thus, Lewin asserts, "Lesbian and gay commitment ceremonies offer symbolic resistance to heterosexist domination, but they often do so by exalting the very values they might claim to challenge" (p. 234).

The focus of the current inquiry centers on how the television series "Gay Weddings" offers viewers a glimpse into how Lewin's (1998) observations transfer to media presentations of weddings that fall out of the mainstream of current versions. To answer the questions of the current inquiry, what do the weddings in "Gay Weddings" look like, and what are some common themes—such as the importance of family and additional pressures experienced—among the weddings presented, I first give a brief background on the show itself, then discuss the content of the eight episodes in terms of these two research questions.

"Gay Weddings" as Media Artifact

The producers of "Gay Weddings" began recruiting couples to appear on the show in 2001. Because of budget considerations, production was limited to southern California (Shister, 2002); all four couples were from Los Angeles. Casting began in May 2001, and all weddings had to take place by May 2002 ("Gay Weddings Go Prime Time," 2002). Couples were recruited through ads in the local gay press, e-mails, ads in coffee shops in gay areas, and personal contacts ("Gay Weddings Go Prime Time," 2002).

Of the 25 couples who responded, these were narrowed down to the four couples, two gay and two lesbian, who appear in the final production (Shister, 2002). Show co-creator Kirk Marcolina cites that couples were chosen because they were comfortable in front of the camera, and for the different kinds of wedding ceremonies they were planning ("Gay Weddings Go Prime Time," 2002). Some 2,000 hours were videotaped (Lin-Eftekhar, 2002). The resulting eight episodes follow the four selected couples simultaneously in chronological order as they plan their ceremonies. Three of the couples are both Caucasian, one of the lesbian couples consists of Sonja, who is African-American, and Lupe, who is Hispanic. Narration comes from the couples, their families, and friends. Occasionally, participants speak directly to the camera during "video diary" segments. Same-sex couples are invited to apply to be considered for future episodes at commercial breaks. For this study, I recorded the entire series of eight episodes promoted as Bravo's "Gay Weddings Marathon" in early 2003. A description of each couple's wedding story follows.

Scott and Harley

Scott, a 32-year-old consultant, and Harley, a 29-year-old who works in sales, have been together for two years. One of the storylines in their wedding reflects their seeming incompatibility, with episodes highlighting their recurring differences of opinion, and the fact that they are seeing a couples' counselor, with Scott seeing a counselor of his own. The viewer sees them constantly disagreeing about the details of their wedding, from the location of the ceremony to the centerpieces for their reception. Harley especially expresses concern over Scott's (who had once studied to be a Catholic priest) desire to include a strongly religious element into the ceremony.

The other storyline concerns how Harley and Scott's families have accepted or not accepted their decision to have a wedding. Harley's mother is shown as very supportive and

accepting of their relationship, and is involved with wedding preparations, as she is providing financial support. Scott, on the other hand, admits he has never actually come out to his parents, who are very conservative. One of the narratives involving this couple's wedding focuses on how Scott's parents, while saying on camera they don't fully understand his sexuality and commitment to Harley, do attend the wedding and demonstrate their support for Scott. Thus, in Scott and Harley's story, family plays a central part, as viewers see that Scott's parents do come around and show their acceptance for his gay wedding. Indeed, during the wedding reception, Scott's father gives his son a kiss and tells him he loves him.

Scott and Harley's wedding takes place in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, the place where they first met. They have invited some 40 guests, and throw a pre-wedding dinner at which drag queens hired by Harley perform because he wanted everyone to "see more gay life." The ceremony, held on the beach, is very casual, with all the guests dressed in casual, tropical-themed clothing. Harley and Scott wear tropical shirts with slacks, and they appear barefoot. Harley is escorted by his mother; Scott by his parents. The officiant appears to be a male friend, and the ceremony includes the exchanging of rings, and some hint of religion as the officiant mentions "God" and ask guests to pray. Scott and Harley read vows they have written themselves. The couple poses for photographs and then joins their reception with sit down dinner and dancing. Their wedding day ends with everyone watching a fireworks display.

Dan and Gregg

Of the couples who appear in this set of episodes, Dan and Gregg are clearly the most affluent. Together for several years, Dan is a 37-year-old Hollywood movie executive and Gregg, 35, is vice president of a travel company specializing in gay vacations. One of the recurring themes in their narrative is the way they demonstrate affection through gifts and surprise trips. For example, Gregg surprises Dan with a helicopter ride on Valentine's Day, and

Dan makes a last-minute surprise visit to Gregg while he is working at a gay-themed ocean cruise in Hawaii.

The other major storyline for Dan and Gregg revolves around how each man's family regards his sexual orientation and decision to marry. Gregg's family is very supportive; his parents and siblings attend the wedding and some of the pre-wedding events, while Dan struggles to gain the acceptance of his mother and sister, who live across the country. "The journey with my family has been a bumpy one," he comments. While Dan receives numerous Christmas gifts from them, they decide not to attend his wedding and, while they never appear on camera, according to Dan, they think "it's odd" for him to be living with a man and to want to commit to Gregg. Throughout his experience, however, Gregg consistently offers Dan support and reassures him that he is loved and appreciated. While Dan admits to being jealous of the support Gregg has from his family, Dan's three cousins do show him their support by attending the pre-wedding dinner and the ceremony itself. "It meant the world to me," says Dan. Dan and Gregg attend a "bridal" shower thrown by their friends, and host a pre-wedding dinner at which Gregg's mother makes a toast to her "two favorite sons."

The couple hires Merv Griffin Productions to put together their wedding, which is set at the luxurious Park Plaza hotel with about 200 guests. Several times they refer to their wedding as "showtime." At the outdoor ceremony, Dan and Gregg wear identical suits and ties and walk in together. A gospel choir provides music. Their officiant is Phil, who apparently is a close friend. They say vows they have written to each other, and exchange "eternity bands" which are brought into the ceremony by their pet dog. The ceremony evokes a somewhat religious nature, with Phil mentioning the word "God" several times. Phil mentions that some people have chosen not to be at the ceremony, referring to the absence of Dan's mother and sister. The ceremony ends with the traditional Jewish breaking of glass.

Guests are greeted into the reception indoors by a Scottish bagpipe ensemble. The party includes a lavish sit-down dinner, wedding cake (actually consisting of a tower of individual cupcakes), a live band and dancing, with the traditional Jewish wedding music and chair dance; the atmosphere inside the large reception hall evokes images of a glamorous, "movie-star" wedding. As Gregg's brother-in-law and father each make toasts to the couple, we see Dan's emotional reaction as they welcome him into their family.

Eve and Dale

Together for four years, Dale, a 32-year-old entertainment lawyer, and Eve, a 30-year-old film student, are shown dealing with their somewhat controlling wedding officiant, a New Age-inspired woman named Chohosh, as they plan their wedding. Eve's parents, though supportive of her relationship with Dale, renege on their financial contribution to the wedding, though Eve's mother is clearly enthusiastic about the wedding itself. Her grandfather is also supportive. The reaction of Dale's family to their wedding, on the other hand, was "tepid," and she is not sure if any of her family will attend. She comments that her wedding to Eve does not seem to hold the same status as that of her siblings' heterosexual weddings. Despite Dale and Eve's concerns about their families' attendance, their families meet each other for the first time at a "rehearsal" lunch at Eve's parents' home and attend and participate in the wedding. Dale and Eve also have a bridal shower held in their honor by their friends.

Dale and Eve's wedding ceremony and reception are held in a high-end hotel with about 50 guests. At their ceremony, they are each escorted separately by their parents, and both have a maid of honor. An acoustic ensemble with vocalist provides the music for the ceremony, with the officiant blowing a conch shell to cue each woman into the ceremony. Eve and Dale say their own vows, and exchange rings reciting more traditional vows ("With this ring, I thee wed"). Both wear simple, white designer gowns and carry a bouquet of red roses.

The ceremony is marked by minor mishaps; the officiant causes some snafus, such as saying that Dale's family came from Albania, rather than Armenia, which Dale corrects during the ceremony, and she drops small pieces of paper from the book she uses to recite from. and picks them up. Shots of Dale and Eve looking concerned are interspersed as the ceremony progresses. After the ceremony, Dale comments, "Well, that was a comedy of errors." The following reception consists of a sit-down dinner, music provided by a DJ, dancing, and a wedding cake, with Dale and Eve cutting it and feeding each other. Eve's mother makes a toast to the couple. Both Dale and Eve toss their bouquets. Their reception ends with them slow dancing in the almost-empty reception hall.

Sonja and Lupe

Though all the couples are shown planning their wedding together, Sonja and Lupe seem to experience the most stress, as their plans are met with obstacles at almost every step. Sonja, 39, is an emergency room supervisor and Lupe, 32, is in marketing. Their parents are not mentioned, but Sonja does have a teenage son. Though he is accepting and supportive of her, Sonja worries about his reaction to their wedding. When Sonja tells him, he reacts very positively, telling her that he assumes he will give her away at the ceremony.

As Sonja and Lupe scout for ceremony sites, they experience discrimination; on the phone, one hotel manager seems welcoming, but when Sonja and Lupe visit the site together, they encounter the cold shoulder, with the manager saying they cannot be accommodated. They get an outright "absolutely not" when they visit another site and say they are having a lesbian commitment ceremony. They finally decide to hold their ceremony and reception at the home of a lesbian couple they know, who had offered their home initially, though Lupe was not entirely happy with the location. Another obstacle involves the fear that their wedding cake will not be

made, as the same friend who offered her home was supposed to make it, but her father dies just two days before the wedding. The friend still makes the cake, much to Lupe's relief.

Of the four weddings featured, theirs is the least lavish. The ceremony takes place in the backyard of their friends' modest home with about 40 guests. Sonja is escorted in first by her son. Lupe, who is accompanied by her sister, comes in next. There are no others in the bridal party. Sonja is dressed in a dressy, flowing white pantsuit and does not carry any flowers. Lupe wears a white, formal long cocktail-length gown with matching headdress (but no veil) and carries a bouquet. The officiant appears to be a female minister, who refers to the Church of Jesus Christ, although there is no mention of "God" or any other religious reference. Sonja and Lupe repeat gender-neutral vows spoken by the officiant, which are based loosely on traditional vows. They exchange rings while saying the traditional "With this ring, I thee wed."

After they are declared "spouse and spouse," guests mingle outside for the reception. However, the weather, despite their planning and obtaining outdoor heaters, turns too cold for comfort and the party is moved indoors. Lupe and her sister have a whispered argument about all the bustle, but everything is rearranged and turns out smoothly. The aforementioned wedding cake is shown formally presented, despite Lupe's concerns that it appeared burnt before it was decorated. No dancing is shown. Sonja's son makes a toast to the happy couple. Their wedding day ends as Sonja and Lupe are shown leaving the home in a limousine. There is an epilogue to their story, as the viewer sees them enjoying a trip to the oceanside during their honeymoon.

Discussion

In the current study, I examined how "Gay Weddings" presents weddings and commitment ceremonies of the same-sex couples it features, using hegemony as a way to explain the appeal of the wedding as narrative. Specifically, I aimed to see how the weddings in "Gay

Weddings" were presented, and to what extent they reflect or contradict the hegemonic view of the wedding ceremony associated with heterosexual weddings.

Taken together, all four weddings described here follow closely some kind of traditional "wedding" script: a formalized public ceremony incorporating an exchanging of rings and vows, followed by a reception; the two lesbian couples wore the requisite wedding white. Couples expressed their desire of having a wedding/commitment ceremony in front of their family and friends and have their relationship accorded the same status as heterosexual marriages.

The "packaging" of the program reflects the message that these formalized events in which gay and lesbian couples publicly declare their commitment and love to each other are the same as those of heterosexual couples. Even its title illustrates a subtext of the program as mainstreaming same-sex unions. The title "Gay Weddings" certainly has a more traditional ring than "Same Sex Commitment Ceremonies," for example. This is further manifested by the series' opening credits, which features a wedding cake used as a background for the show's title and names of the couples written in frosting. The cake toppers, a bride and groom, are knocked off and replaced with figures of two grooms standing together and two brides standing together.

In general, all four weddings model the hegemonic, heterosexual wedding, with the exception of the sexual orientation of the couples. However, some elements are missing in this group of weddings. For example, except for some religious reference, one notices the absence of clearly identified clergy, except at Sonja and Lupe's wedding, and none of the ceremonies were held in a church or religious site. Though there is some mention in the first episode that same-sex marriages are not legally recognized, there is no mention about religious sanctioning of gay and lesbian weddings.

In the four total hours of programming, several common themes within each couple's story are evident. The one given the most time and attention was the importance of family

participation. Though surrounded by supportive and close friends, each couple expressed how significant it was for their families to be involved in some way with the wedding. Similar to what Lewin (1998) found in her study of gay and lesbian commitment ceremonies, their relationship to their families, especially parents, was extremely important to them. The angst and concern over whether family members would attend or even accept their sexual orientation and decision to publicly commit to their partner was especially evident for two of the gay men: Dan, whose mother and sister refused to attend his and Gregg's ceremony, and Scott, who hoped that his mother and father would accept him as a gay man.

For the two lesbian couples, the acceptance by their families also was important. Even as Eve and Dale admitted on camera they were concerned about their families' attendance, both sets of parents did attend and participate. Sonja was worried about her son's reaction to her and Lupe's wedding plans; there was no need, it turned out. Regardless of the respective outcomes for each of these weddings, a high value was placed on what relatives thought about not only the wedding, but of the participants' choices in partner.

The way in which these same-sex couples approached the planning of their weddings illustrated an apparently equal division of labor. While planning and decision-making often fall on the bride-to-be in the typical heterosexual wedding, the couples in "Gay Weddings" made decisions about the most detailed elements of their ceremonies as a team, visiting sites together, choosing clothing together, and the like. For example, Dan and Gregg assembled wedding favors together, and Scott and Harley argued over centerpieces. Sonja and Lupe visited a bridal show and looked for sites together; Dale and Eve tried on wedding dresses together. These depictions reflect the egalitarian nature of same-sex couples, as compared to heterosexual couples, in which the woman most often does the work in planning what is supposedly "her day" (Geller, 2001; Lowery & Otnes, 1994; Currie, 1993). Also notable in this regard was the

honesty of the couples as they talked about the problems they experienced: they all admitted to being stressed and worried about their weddings; several admitted to having misgivings and being nervous on the wedding day itself.

For each of the couples, having a formal ceremony served as a way to strengthen their relationships and to attain public recognition, especially from their families, they felt gave their relationship an elevated status as a "married" couple. The common-sense, widely accepted and rarely questioned idea that marriage elevates a relationship manifests a hegemonic view of romance and love in our society. In that the same-sex couples featured in this program all wanted a wedding/commitment ceremony attests to the status society gives to unions that are made publicly. Each of the couples, by agreeing to appear in the program, obviously share the same view, as Dan, who explains that even though same-sex marriages are not legal (in California), "It's really no more complicated than two people who love each other and they want to make a commitment to each other in front of their friends and family."

This theme centering on the significance of the wedding manifests itself more concretely during a brief follow-up to each couple's wedding, as participants comment on what the ceremony meant to them. The recurrent sentiment for the couples in these "Gay Weddings" episodes illustrates is that the wedding ceremony has strengthened their bond:

> Eve (married to Dale): "I think that if we hadn't had a ceremony and we hadn't gone through the whole process, you know, then there wouldn't have been any milestone or major moment to signify the change in our relationship";
>
> Sonja (married to Lupe): "...it *is* the whole hoopla. It is, you know, getting everything together and just the planning everything and have the whole ceremony. Definitely a different feeling. I feel so differently about Lupe now";

Dan (married to Gregg): "I think the ceremony has created a shift in our relationship and I feel like it's given people that know us to see how special our union is";

Harley (married to Scott): "It's not 'I' or 'me' anymore. It's an 'us.'"

In that this first set of episodes of "Gay Weddings" features what one would certainly call "mainstream" weddings modeled after heterosexual weddings, it serves to support Condit's (1994) interpretation of hegemony as concordance. Rather than ideology forced upon a subordinate by a ruling, dominant class, as hegemony is defined, concordance emerges from among all the viewpoints and voices considered within pluralism, with those having the most universal appeal "rising to the top," so to speak

On the other hand, the gay and lesbian couples included here share and express these universally appealing, commonsensical, accepted views. They all go about putting the tremendous amount of time, energy, and emotional investment into the planning and execution of their ceremonies, which they often refer to as "wedding," which pointedly illustrates how deeply inculcated and ingrained these societal ideals and expectations are. As Lewis (1992) contends: "...the 'common sense' of the social order...may originate in the collective; but, if persistent, it is soon internalized in the 'taken for grantedness' of the individual's natural attitude (p. 283)." One can view "Gay Weddings," then, as offering its viewers, and the greater mass media industry, something "natural": a look into weddings, which we all accept, with a just a minor twist—these are weddings that just happen to be of gay people.

Conclusion

"As it is, 'Gay Weddings' is a sweet, enjoyable program, but it could have made more of a statement," writes Alter (2002) in his critique of the show. Alter asserts that rather than approaching the subject as reality TV, the producers could have used a traditional documentary

format to give viewers a history behind gay weddings and background on current marriage laws in the US. However, in the context of hegemony, this would have further demarcated these weddings as gay vs. straight. Throughout the eight episodes, one does receive this message repeatedly, lest the viewer forget these are indeed gay weddings: Gregg on the gay cruise, Sonja and Lupe being turned away from potential wedding sites, drag queens performing at Scott and Harley's rehearsal dinner, and Dan and Scott's emotional turmoil as they yearn for their parents' acceptance. Even Eve and Dale ask an employee (who may have been the manager) at the site they choose if "commitment ceremonies" have been held there (he says yes, no problem, and even adds, "You two look perfect for each other").

Thus, while Alter writes that a more educational, informational background would help viewers appreciate the obstacles same-sex couples face, those struggles are interwoven into their stories anyway. "Gay Weddings" as entertainment programming, though it tells an edited story through its producers' eyes, manages to illustrate both hegemony and counterhegemony—the hegemony surrounding the belief that relationships needs to be formalized (through public ceremony) and a counterhegemony that questions heterosexuality as a requisite for romantic love.

As such, its very existence and dissemination as media programming, coupled with its realistic presentation (with videotape enhancing its realistic quality compared to film, as noted by Feuer [1983]), provides viewers who otherwise have no or limited experience with same-sex weddings an idea, regardless of whether it is accurate or true, of real gay weddings. As a subject with emotional appeal, "Gay Weddings" provides a certain degree of support for Lewin's (1998) observation regarding the dichotomy of convention and subversion these ceremonies embody: "Celebrants struggle to overcome the limitations that accompany the statutory invisibility of their

unions, but it is a lack of status that also makes the rituals as emotionally compelling as they are" (p. 250).

Whether future episodes of "Gay Weddings" continue to "normalize" same-sex weddings by selecting couples who base their own ceremonies on the heterosexual rubric serves as a research question for further study. Additionally, examining how "Gay Weddings" as gay-themed programming situates itself within the broader cable television environment and within the wider scope of mass media serves as another path to investigate how such programming evidences hegemony even as they challenge media treatment of the assumed heterosexual nature of the romance narrative.

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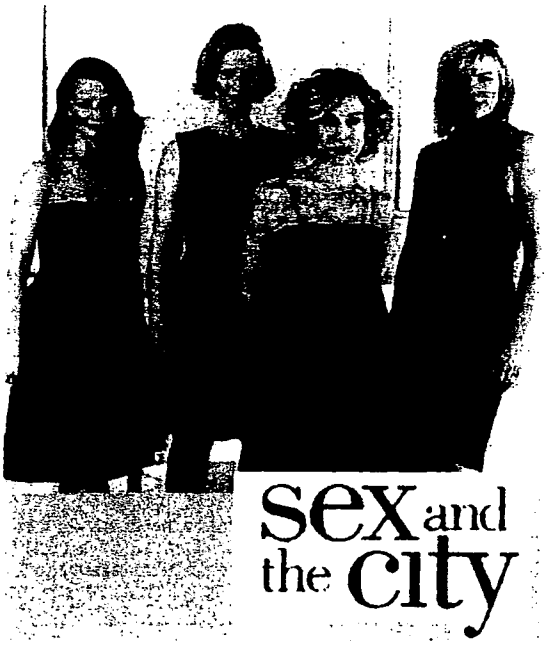
Narrative Structure in *Sex and the City*: "I Couldn't Help But Wonder..."



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Abstract:

Sex and the City uses a unique narrative structure to portray the complex issues faced by single women. Each episode, the central theme is posed by the main character as she ponders a topic for her weekly column. This device performs several functions that aid in illustrating the meaning of the single woman and creating identification with the audience: voiceover narration and the development of spectatorship, construction of multiple meanings, and women's relationship with technology.

Narrative Structure in *Sex and the City*: "I Couldn't Help But Wonder..."

Introduction

Sex and the City is a popular HBO program that chronicles the lives of four single women in New York City. Based on the weekly sex column in the *New York Observer* written by Candace Bushnell,[1] and produced by Darren Star of *Beverly Hills 92010* and *Melrose Place* fame, the series uses a narrative structure unique to television comedy to portray the complex issues faced by single women in their 30's. During each episode, the central theme is posed by the main character, Carrie Bradshaw, in the form of a question, often preempted by the phrase, "I couldn't help but wonder...", as she ponders a topic for her column in the fictional newspaper *The New York Star*. The question is stated through voiceover narration while Carrie types on her laptop

[1] In 1996, Bushnell's columns were published as a book, *Sex and the City*.

computer. This narrative device performs several functions that aid in illustrating the meaning of the single woman and creating identification with the audience.

Sex and the City has been aired since 1998, and finished its 5th season in the summer of 2002. Over its 74 episodes, the series has gone through a gradual evolution in terms of narrative structure and characterization, but the main narrative device throughout has been how the central theme is framed for each of the main characters. This paper addresses the narrative structure of *Sex and the City* in three areas: voiceover narration and the development of spectatorship, construction of multiple meanings around a central question, and the relationship of women with technology, specifically in regard to Carrie's relationship with her laptop computer.

Sex and the City, its cast, and crew are regularly nominated for top awards in the television industry. The show and its main star, Sarah Jessica Parker, have won Golden Globe Awards in their respective categories from 2000-2002. *Sex and the City* also garnered the Emmy for Outstanding Comedy Series in 2001 making it the first cable show to win in that category. (Internet Movie Database) Many episodes reach audiences in excess of 11 million viewers, an accomplishment for a non-network program. (Tauber et al., 2001) Its presence on HBO has offered a commercial-free, half hour, setting new standards for television in terms of sexually explicit scenes and discussion.

Parker's character Carrie serves as the narrator and filter by which the audience navigates through her life and the lives of her three friends. Miranda Hobbes, played by Cynthia Nixon, is a successful attorney; Charlotte York, played by Kristen Davis, is an art dealer; and Samantha Jones, played by Kim Cattrall, is owner of a public relations

firm. While the show is primarily focused on the lives of single women, throughout the series, each character has been portrayed in a variety of relationship states, including committed relationships, living together, marriage, and divorce.

Single Women on TV – Historical Perspective

Even before Helen Gurley Brown wrote *Sex and the Single Girl* in 1962, television shows have featured single women. But Brown's book introduced the idea of a fabulous single life for women, one that is a "rich, full life of dating," counter to the previous stereotypes of single women as lonely and isolated. (Gurley-Brown, 1962) Comedic television shows since the late 1960's have attempted to capture the experiences of single women as lead or title characters, from *That Girl* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* to *Laverne and Shirley, Three's Company, Living Single*, and *Murphy Brown,* and currently *Friends, Less Than Perfect,* and *Will and Grace.* These shows were developed over a time when the television comedy form was evolving from the standard sitcom format to what Newcomb termed the "domestic comedy" in which setting and relationships were the main plot device rather than situation. (Newcomb, 1974)

The Mary Tyler Moore Show first aired in 1970 and is often considered the first example of women's independence depicted on television. (Douglas, 1994: p. 204) Set in Minneapolis, Mary Richards was a single woman who moved to the city to start a career as a news producer at the fictional station WJM-TV. The story lines of the series revolved around two aspects of Mary's life, her familial relationships with her co-workers and her interactions with her friends in the apartment in which she lived. While this show was groundbreaking in regard to its depiction of a single career woman, critiques of the show have discussed the framing of Mary in the traditional feminine role, substituting a family of co-workers and friends for a traditional family. (Dow, 1990) *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* is one of many programs that were produced in the seventies

that dealt with the contradictions being created by the interests of the women's movement and more traditional notions of family. (D'Acci, 1992: p. 172) Similar shows of this period included *Rhoda, Alice, Good Times, Maude, One Day at a Time*, and *All in the Family*.

Other comedies featuring single women have been bound by either home or work spaces. On *Laverne and Shirley, Living Single, Friends* and *Three's Company*, most action takes place in the apartment in which the main characters lived. Shows like *Murphy Brown* and *Less Than Perfect* (or ensembles that featured single women like *Ally McBeal*, *News Radio,* and *Just Shoot Me*) follow *The Mary Tyler Moore Show's* formula for work place interaction, thus repeating the coworker-as-surrogate-family plot device.

Each of these shows and the countless others that followed this home/work setting have been limited by its format and structure in portraying the multiple positionality of the single lifestyle. Treatment of issues like sex and sexuality, loneliness, relationships, and children were treated in a superficial manner that was shown in relationship to the hegemonic ideas of family in society. For example, *Friends* uses the standard plot of neurotic, almost desperate women, seeking the perfect man, but all the while, the perfect man is right next-door. *Will and Grace* offers the same plot, with the twist being that Will is gay, and therefore unattainable in the traditional sense. While these shows have featured an occasional lament by the characters as to their fear of being alone or their inability to secure a long-term relationship, the audience is never privy to the true struggles of the single woman in defining herself in society. Limited by the standard situation comedy format and network television's standards for

censorship, it is difficult for these shows to foster the broader discussion of issues and identification that is found in *Sex and the City*.

While *Sex and the City* has been criticized for its emphasis on white heterosexuality, its blatant consumerism, and its sexual objectification of women, the unique qualities of the narrative allow for reading the text in multiple ways. In regard to the popularity of shows featuring single women, Lotz said "especially when series and characters resonate with audiences to the degree that many recently have, we must explore what is in these texts with an eye to their complexity instead of quickly dismissing them as part of a hegemonic, patriarchal, capitalist society." (Lotz, 2001: p. 114) One explanation for the popularity of shows like *Sex and the City* is that women viewers are able to admire the lead characters for their career successes, while, at the same time, identifying with their relationship troubles (Hunt 1998). The remainder of this paper will deal with the ways in which the narrative structure of *Sex and the City* provides a unique site of identification and meaning for the single woman.

Research Questions

Does *Sex and the City* provide a realistic portrayal of single women in their 30's? What role does the narrative structure play in a realistic portrayal?

The first question requires a clear definition of the "realistic portrayal" of the single woman. But the object of realism is difficult to ascertain in the television medium. "One of the important insights of structural linguistics is that no symbol system directly reflects the real world." (Allen, 1987: p. 10) The question of reality is problematized first by attempting to define what one means by a "single" woman. As Judith Butler observed, it is difficult to ascertain the essence of what constitutes a woman, "for we refer not only to women as a social category but also as a felt sense of self, a culturally conditioned or constructed subjective identity." (Butler, 1990: p. 325) The term "single woman" can be used to describe a variety of ways in which those with female bodies can be constructed. A single woman can be unmarried, divorced, widowed, separated, can have or not have children, or can be in a committed relationship (either heterosexual or lesbian) while living with someone or not. While each of these situations share the representation of a woman as the degree to which a man is or is not present in her life, each has unique issues and challenges to be discussed within the narrative.

Like many domestic comedies of our time, *Sex and the City* has incorporated qualities of the serial or soap opera that make for what many researchers have studied as pleasure in melodrama (Fiske, 1990; Brunsdon, 1997). While each episode of *Sex and the City* is self-contained, regular viewers recognize the value of watching episodes in order, as much of the action, humor, and discourse revolve around character

development, relationships, and situations over time. The four main characters are stable in the series, but many past lovers have left and returned, providing another point of identification with single female viewers. Plots play out over several episodes and seasons, like the relationship of Carrie and Big, Miranda's pregnancy, and Charlotte's separation and divorce.

Another unique characteristic that lends toward the creation of realism for the series is its varied use of locations in and around New York City. While the show has several points of regular action - Carrie's apartment, the diner in which they meet, and Charlotte's gallery - many of the episodes feature what the director, Michael Patrick Harris, called walk-alongs, scenes in which the characters are filmed while walking along a New York street.[2] Other locations include numerous bars, clubs, restaurants, galleries, and other outdoor New York scenes like parks and boats, not to mention out-of-town locations in the Hamptons, Los Angeles and San Francisco. This provides a strong difference to the traditional sitcom in which location shots are rare and action occurs in one or two main sets.

But it is the unique qualities of the central theme device that provide the best opportunity for addressing "reality." One way to assess "reality" of the portrayal is to discuss the point of identification or spectatorship of the audience. In *Sex and the City*, the central theme and other points throughout the show are narrated by Carrie, often filmed looking out a window or walking pensively around her apartment, then filmed looking at her computer screen while she types and speaks the central theme of the episode. The transference of the gaze from looking at her to looking with her is an

[2] Harris, Sex and the City DVD, Season 3.

example of the feminine gaze (Mulvey 1989; Cooper, 2001). This gaze is in contrast to the long-standing usage of the male gaze in media production in which audiences are encouraged through camera angles and discourse to identify with the masculine spectator position.

Additionally, the discourse of the voiceover provides feminine identification. In providing Carrie's thoughts, feelings, and ideas, and narrating the activities of the other characters, she is able to weave together the multiple meanings of the central question. Allen recognized the role of narrator in engaging the audience through acknowledgement, by directly addressing or confiding in the reader. (Allen, 1992: p. 114) Kozloff identified a typology of narrator to assess the role of narrator in the text. This typology included the degree to which the narrator is a character in the story, the perspective of the narrator to the story, the distance in which she is related in terms of time, space, and self-consciousness, the reliability of the narrator, and her omniscience.(Kozloff, 1987: pp. 82-84) The character of Carrie provides voiceover narration to each episode, but does so in a manner in which her perspective, distance, and omniscience vary. She is often privy to events in which she is not physically present (like when she narrates what is happening at Charlotte's apartment or Samantha's office), but during the voiceover moments in which she frames the central question, one gets a sense of her insecurity, self-consciousness, and subjectivity. The posing of the central question allows not only Carrie, but the other women, to grapple with these questions in a manner that does not usually provide a clear and unambiguous closure at the end of each episode.

The use of voiceover has been incorporated by other television comedy (it is much more likely in dramas like *Magnum PI* or *The Waltons* and is prevalent in advertising) over time, but rarely in regard to the single woman, thus problematizing the issue of spectatorship from the single woman's perspective. In the past, *The Wonder Years*, *Dobie Gillis* and *Doogie Howser* - which coincidentally utilized the typing of his journal on his desktop computer to summarize the moral of each episode - effectively used voiceover and direct address. Currently, shows like *The Bernie Mac Show* and *Titus*, both on Fox, have chosen to use direct address. Shows using either voiceover or direct address with female characters include *My So-Called Life, Felicity, Clarissa Explains It All*, and much earlier *The Patty Duke Show*, but these shows featured teenage or young adult characters in the main role. But, as in the case of *The Patty Duke Show*, the plot device of making the audience privy to Patty's thoughts via her journal writings provided a point of identification for teenage girls who were struggling with their own identity and sexuality. (Luckett, 1997: p. 96) One could argue that Carrie's preparation of her column as a type of journal in which she, and ultimately the audience, work out their own issues of identification as single women.

A second aspect to assess in terms of the realistic nature of the portrayal would be the continuum of postfeminist attributes that are present in a text. Lotz defined four postfeminist attributes:

1) Narratives that explore the diverse relations to power women inhabit
2) Depictions of varied feminist solutions and loose organization of activism
3) Deconstructions of binary categories of gender and sexuality, instead of viewing these categories as flexible and indistinct
4) The way situations illustrating struggles faced by women and feminists are raised and examined in the series (Lotz, 2001)

These attributes were developed through an analysis of poststructuralist thought and theories of third-wave feminism. In her doctoral dissertation, Lotz analyzed several contemporary shows, including the first two seasons of *Sex and the City,* for the presence of postfeminist attributes. She found that *Sex and the City* best exhibited the postfeminist attributes of exploring diverse power relationships of women and deconstruction of the binaries of gender, but handled political issues of activism and race either subtly or superficially.[3] But Lotz concluded "despite the absence of representations identifying ethnicity and class as important aspects of women's subjectivities and experiences, the series is able to discuss explicitly the sexual politics that some women must negotiate in the late 1990s." (Lotz, 2000: p. 206) Lotz utilized the depiction of the central question as the main grounds for the multiple positionality of the series. It is the role of the narrative in creating the forum for approaching these issues in a manner that is consistent across episodes, yet humorous, ironic, and sensitive.

Finally, another way to look at "reality" is in regard to how the women in the series relate to the objects in their lives. *Sex and the City* has multiple points in which this can be analyzed, in terms of women's relationship with fashion, shoes, men, friends, New York City, etc. But looking at the narrative device of the central theme, the main object in Carrie's life is her laptop computer. Women's relationship with technology has been a topic under study in regard to the gendering of technology and the creation of identity around technology (Turkle, 1995; Margolis/Fisher, 2002). Carrie's relationship with her laptop can be analyzed for the accuracy of the portrayal.

[3] After the second season of *Sex and the City*, however, episodes were developed around both the issues of race and class, probably in response to such criticism.

Methodology

Each of these three aspects was analyzed to determine the extent to which the main plot device of the central theme is the key force in providing identification with and polysemy of the text. The entire series (5 seasons, 74 episodes) was reviewed to identify examples of how each aspect of the central theme device contributed to the reality in the portrayal of single women.

Voiceover Narration

As mentioned above, the voiceover narration technique offers a point of spectatorship and identification that is not available in traditional comedies featuring single women. On shows such as *Friends, Will and Grace*, or *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, one sees the interactions of the single woman with other characters, but is rarely, if ever, privy to her internal thoughts or monologue. This one dimensional look might show the result of an internal struggle, and may even feature scenes in which the character hashes alternatives with another, but is not able to provide a more complex understanding of the internal monologue behind the dilemma.

What one experiences when listening to the buildup to the central question is the line of logic and thought that Carrie makes to get to her central question. For example, Carrie often laments about the number of singles in Manhattan and the infinite possibilities that exist. These are first perceived as positive qualities, that having multiple options is a positive attribute. But she ultimately builds to her central question, for example "Has monogamy become too much to expect?" Or in an episode in Season Five, she describes the feeling that single women have when their careers and lives are

going well, yet they lack a committed relationship. She asks the question, "Why is it that the one thing we don't have ruins all the things we do have? Why does one minus a plus one add up to zero?" [4]

Sex and the City uses directing and film techniques that add to identification with the characters. By first hearing Carrie's thoughts, and then having the perspective of Carrie as she looks out her window, around her apartment, and then ultimately at her computer screen, the viewer not only gains access to her thoughts, but is actually able to virtually become the character. The combination of hearing the words as she speaks the central question and watching them simultaneously typed on the computer screen is a strong bridge in tying the subject position of the audience to the character.

During the first two seasons, *Sex and the City* experimented with other creative address techniques. In the first season, it was not unusual for Carrie to break character and directly address the audience, perhaps providing some additional background information during a phone conversation or while eating at the diner. This technique, however, created a confused audience identity, in which one is first being addressed by the character and then later becoming the character. Through the second season, a common device was to use a montage of strangers, non-characters, directly addressing the camera at the point just after the central question was posed. These strangers provided the multiple ways in which the question could be framed and understood, but identification was minimized because there was no history with these characters. As the series progressed and the characters became more developed, these two

[4] This is in reference to her invitation to her own book party in which she does not have a guest to invite with her.

techniques were no longer necessary, and *Sex and the City* consistently relied on the role of Carrie's voiceover to provide the main points of identification and spectatorship.

Polysemic Meaning

While the main characters, Carrie Bradshaw, Miranda Hobbes, Charlotte York, and Samantha Jones, are seemingly similar in background and status, one way in which multiple meanings are conveyed is through the unique perspectives of each woman. Miranda is the successful attorney that has a cynical outlook on relationships; Charlotte is the eternal optimist, searching for the perfect man; and Samantha uses sex as its own end, more concerned with pleasure than intimacy. Carrie is the practical one, caught between the reality of her situation as an independent, single woman and the ideal that she will one day find her soul mate. While each character is ostensibly true to the stereotype she represents, the plot often involves juxtapositions of traits that make for less consistent, yet more believable characterizations. For example, while Charlotte would be deemed the prude of the group, during the first three seasons, she had almost as many sex partners as Samantha. Her promiscuity was positioned in relation to her search for a mate, while Samantha's was represented as sexually aberrant. But, within this role, in a few rare episodes, Samantha has revealed a vulnerability for a closer relationship. The show portrays the multiple meanings through humor, pun, and irony, as well as poignant situations and complex relationships.

The central questions cover issues of dating, relationships, family, friendships, children, sex and sexuality. The first episode of *Sex and the City* showed Carrie

pondering the end of love in Manhattan. She wrote "cupid has flown the co-op." [5] Then she followed up with "How the hell did we get into this mess?" Figure 1 provides some of the specific central questions considered in subsequent episodes.

Figure 1 – Central Question Examples

- "How powerful is beauty?" ("Models and Mortals," Season One)
- "Is there a secret cold war between marrieds and singles?" ("Bay of Married Pigs," Season One)
- "Was secret sex the ultimate form of intimacy?" ("Secret Sex," Season One)
- "Are relationships the religion of the 90's? ("O Come All Ye Faithful," Season One)
- "What are the breakup rules?" ("Take Me Out to the Ballgame," Season Two)
- "Is it better to fake it than to be alone?" ("They Shoot Single People, Don't They," Season Two)
- "Can you change a man?" ("Old Dogs, New Dicks," Season Two)
- "Are New Yorkers evolving past relationships?" ("Evolution," Season Two)
- "Can you be friends with an ex?" ("Ex and the City," Season Two)
- "Are we romantically challenged or are we sluts?" (Are We Sluts?" Season Three)
- "Is timing everything?" ("The Big Time," Season Three)
- "Are we 34 going on 13?" ("Hot Child in the City," Season Three)
- "Can you ever really forgive if you can't forget?" ("Time and Punishment," Season Four)
- "How much does a father figure figure?" ("A Vogue Idea," Season Four)
- "Why do we believe our worst reviewers?" ("Critical Condition," Season Five)
- "Were we the new bachelors?" ("The Big Journey," Season Five)

While specific issues of feminist activism are not portrayed in the text, issues of gender, sexuality, and power are often problematized by the central question. For example, during Season Three, an episode entitled "Boy, Girl, Boy, Girl" posed the question, "Has the opposite sex become obsolete?" Carrie's newest boyfriend, having

[5] This statement refers to the cooperative ownership of many apartments in New York City.

revealed that he had previously dated a man, brought on this dilemma. While Carrie struggled with this confusion, the other characters are dealing with gender ambiguity in separate ways. Miranda is grappling with a relationship with Steve, a clingy boyfriend who seeks a more committed relationship. Miranda is leery about making the decision to move in together. During an argument, Steve accuses Miranda of being the "guy" in the relationship. This causes Miranda to question her own femininity and sends her in near panic to "New York's newest trend," the goddess workshop to find her inner goddess.

At the same time, Charlotte has met a photographer at her gallery that photographs women in male drag, and he convinces her to pose for him. But during the session, Charlotte feels uncomfortable performing masculinity. She uses excuses like claiming to be "bad at math" or "not able to change a tire," thus making her incompetent as a man. To inspire Charlotte, the photographer gives her a pep talk about feeling powerful and dominant, telling her "every woman has a male inside of her." The scene ends with Charlotte saying, "I think I need a bigger sock," and falling into passionate embrace with the photographer.

Samantha is in a power struggle of her own in this episode in which she has hired a male assistant. The assistant is described as an "alpha dog" and proceeds to run Samantha's business in an aggressive and arrogant manner. In a final confrontation, he is rude during a client phone call. Samantha subsequently fires him and then propositions him, with the implication made that during sex she would be on top.

In the final scene of the episode, Carrie's relationship with her "bisexual" boyfriend comes to a head when she goes with him to his ex-boyfriend's birthday party. A multitude of sexualities and complex relationships are portrayed in that the ex-boyfriend is now involved in a committed relationship with another male, and they have a baby together. The baby is the result of an egg that was donated by the ex-boyfriend's ex-girlfriend (played by Alanis Morissette) who has recently gone to Hawaii to marry her female partner. Ultimately Carrie describes the party as "Confused Sexuality Land," and compares herself to the character of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* falling down the rabbit hole. The scene concludes with a game of Spin the Bottle in which Carrie is ultimately kissed by the Alanis Morissette character. Carrie leaves the party resigned to not being comfortable with the deconstruction of the gender roles, chalking up the ambiguity to youthful dalliances. While this scene squelches the potential to grasp the elusive quality of gender, it does provide one example of the character grappling with her own sexual confusion. What this narrative does is provide a troubling of gender that illustrates the fictional nature of the social constructions of the binaries of male and female. (Butler, 1990; p. 339)

While many of these scenes are humorous and rely on pun and irony for the pleasure derived by the audience, by using this technique across the entire series, *Sex and the City* is able to create a pattern of expectations with viewers that what is obvious is not always what it might seem. Other episodes have dealt with confused gender roles. In "Belles of the Balls," the plot is complicated by the fact that the men in which each of the women are involved are acting in a manner that is considered by Carrie to be more stereotypically feminine. "Body image problems, depression, mood swings, late

night phone calls, obsessing over relationships. Did I mention these were my male friends?" She poses the question "Are men just women with balls?" Carrie's ex-boyfriend, known only as Mr. Big, calls her because he is distraught at having been dumped by his latest girlfriend. At the same time, Carrie's current boyfriend acts childish when she receives calls from Big. When Steve finds out that he has testicular cancer and must have one of his testicles removed, he acts in what Miranda considers to be a very vain manner in inquiring about receiving a testicle implant. And, Charlotte now married to Trey and trying desperately to get pregnant, asks Trey to have his sperm tested. His response is one that highlights the equating of sperm count to his idea of masculine identity.

But not all episodes deal specifically with gender roles. Rather they question the traditional rules of society regarding relationships. In an episode entitled "The Monogamist" from Season One, the idea of monogamy and commitment in the traditional sense is portrayed through Carrie's plot in which she sees her boyfriend of the time, Mr. Big, out with another woman. The secondary plots include Miranda sleeping with an ex-boyfriend only to tell him she still wants to see other people; Charlotte refusing to give oral sex to her current partner, which causes him to breakup with her, so she gets a puppy to fulfill her need for commitment; and Samantha using two real estate brokers against each other in a monogamy metaphor. Even Carrie' gay best friend, Sanford Blatch, adds his opinion of monogamy by saying, "I can't even commit to a long distance carrier." The episode, however, does return to a traditional view, when Carrie returns to Mr. Big who has indicated he might be willing to see her

exclusively. Her voiceover is "in a city of infinite options, sometimes there is no better feeling than knowing you only have one."

Another episode during Season Four entitled "A Vogue Idea," dealt with the role of fathers. The central question was "How much does a father figure figure?" While Miranda contemplates the role that Steve, the father of her unborn child, will play in its life, Carrie offers a rare look at her childhood. The audience, for the first time, gets the impression that her father's absence had deeply affected her ability to engage in close, personal relationships with men. Samantha's plot line, taking a more humorous route, showed her attempting to organize a threesome for the birthday of her then-boyfriend Richard, but that goes awry when the young participant calls the older Richard "Daddy."

Some themes are indirectly carried out across episodes, thus creating a matrix of themes throughout the series. In addition to Carrie's kiss with Alanis Morissette, lesbian themes have been explored in multiple episodes. For example, both Miranda and Charlotte became involved in relationships with lesbians. These were portrayed as platonic relationships, but were complicated by expectations. In Miranda's case, she realized that in order to move up in her company, she needed to be in a relationship. When it was mistakenly perceived that she was in a lesbian relationship and that might give her more access to her boss, she played along with the misconception. When she ultimately revealed that she was not a lesbian, her boss proclaimed that it was too bad because his wife had been "looking to add a lesbian couple to their social circle."

In another episode, Charlotte meets a group of lesbians at a gallery opening. She realizes that she enjoys the company of women and is evasive about her sexuality

in order to continue her social interaction with them. But ultimately, when she revealed that she was not a lesbian, she was no longer welcome in the group.

A string of episodes in Season 4 dealt with Samantha's sexual relationship with a woman. The character of Samantha is often presented as the site of the most explicit sexuality, but this was done in contrast to the close relationship she embarked upon with Maria. While Samantha's lesbian experience ended after a few episodes, it did provide a moment in which Samantha is seen as vulnerable and capable of having a relationship that goes beyond sex.

While these scenes deal with overt lesbian themes, there are other aspects of *Sex and the City* as a woman-centered program that could also be deemed a lesbian narrative. Alexander Doty argues that the interest in shows that feature close female friendships is "their crucial investment in constructing narratives that connect an audience's pleasure to the activities and relationships of women – which results in situating most male characters as potential threats to the spectator's narrative pleasure." (Doty, 1993: p. 41) Throughout the series, the women characters are portrayed in supportive family roles, as many of the men often disappoint, leave or are left. Often the central question deals with the loss of independence or a change of lifestyle due to a new relationship, thus disrupting the equilibrium of the female relationships of the series. Examples of this carried across the series include Carrie coming to the aid of an ill Samantha or being asked to accompany Miranda home after eye surgery, Carrie joining Miranda when she breaks down walking down the aisle at her mother's funeral, and Charlotte, upon hearing that Miranda planned to go through with her pregnancy, joyfully proclaiming "we're having a baby" as if she were the father.

These ironic and often surprising twists provide more than simply interesting plot fodder. By positioning the multiple meanings, the audience is able to consider a variety of ways in which an issue might be relevant to them. It also shows the multiplicity of meaning and provides a point that often spurs discussion. It is this ability to create meaning in the lives of women outside the text that provides possibly the greatest power of the narrative.

Relationship with Technology

The column that Carrie writes for the fictional *New York Star* situates her in a career that is both virtual and flexible. A self-proclaimed sexual anthropologist, it is this premise that provides the legitimacy of the varied issues the show covers. By positioning Carrie as a freelance columnist, she is free from the workplace relationships that have often confined the contexts of single women in past television series. Carrie's usage of a laptop computer is a clever device that allows her to be shown in a variety of ways working on her column. Primarily, she is seen in various positions around her apartment, on her bed, at a desk, in a chair, but often Carrie takes to the streets to work on her column, with scenes of her typing in coffee shops and hotel rooms. The presence of technology has changed many traditional workplace interactions, as Sadie Plant found: "all the structures, ladders, and securities with which careers and particular jobs once came equipped have been subsumed by patterns of part-time and discontinuous work which privilege independence, flexibility, and adaptability." (Plant, 1997: pp. 38-39) Sherry Turkle, also working with the nature of technology and identity, found that "the computer offers us both new models of mind and a new medium on

which to project our ideas and fantasies." (Turkle, 1995: p. 9) These theories are consistent in how the laptop and thus Carrie's relationship with the technology is portrayed in the series.

The laptop provides key representations to the narrative. First, it aids in portraying Carrie as a fancy-free type, not chained to a desk or any particular set of circumstances. Her regular relationships are those of her own choosing, not imposed upon her by family or work status. In one episode, Carrie is compared to a wild stallion that is unable to be tamed. ("Ex and the City, Season Two) Her chosen career and usage of technology are reflective of that position.

Secondly, by freeing Carrie from the workplace, the action is able to occur in any number of settings, while still legitimizing her career. She can travel across country for a book tour or go on vacation and still be considered working, as she contemplates relationship issues that occur in The Hamptons or on a visit to the suburbs.

On *Sex and the City*, the laptop takes on the role of sexy accessory, as during Season Five, when Carrie is photographed for her book cover. After discarding several pose ideas that were too risqué for her comfort, the chosen shot shows her in a very short, yet smart skirt, holding the laptop in a shy manner near her waste. In contrast, on the cover of the book, *Sex and the City,* by Candace Bushnell, on which the series is based, Sarah Jessica Parker is photographed in the nude, with only the laptop computer for coverage.

But Carrie's relationship with her computer has been complicated in some episodes. In "My Motherboard, Myself" from Season Four, Carrie's Macintosh computer crashes and she is frantic as she tries to recover it. Her then boyfriend, Aidan, tries to

assist her with the rebooting process, but only makes matters worse while Carrie looks on nervously. The next scene shows the two anxiously waiting for tech support with the laptop wrapped in a pashmina shawl, much like waiting for medical attention in the emergency room. When they are finally called by the technician, they are told that Aidan is a PC guy and Carrie is a Mac person, so therefore incompatible. Aidan later tries to come to Carrie's aide by purchasing a new laptop. Carrie, however, is bothered by Aidan's need to fix things for her, to make things better. Even though her whole career of columns is on the computer and she is helpless in dealing with the situation, she has trouble receiving help. This is not the typical plot in which boy rescues girl. Carrie knows she needs help, but is afraid to accept it for what it might mean in terms of her own independence and ability to handle situations. By complicating the situation in this manner, the plot is opened to a broader identification with the audience.

Conclusion

While many have criticized the framing of the central question through voiceover and typing on the computer as a gimmick (Kirsch, 2001; Avins, 2000), it is this device that precisely provides many ways in which an audience can identify and create meaning in the text. Some have even gone as far as to suggest that it is a *Doogie Howser* rip-off. (Kirsch, 2001) But the premise of the *Doogie Howser* series was markedly different than the way the technique is used in *Sex and the City*. Doogie used a desktop computer that was stationed in his bedroom in his parents' home. He used his computer to compose a journal that summed up the moral of each episode. The usage of the technique came regularly at the end of the show, and often had Doogie reflecting on the lessons learned. The device was used in this manner to summarize the episode and provide closure. In contrast, *Sex and the City's* usage of Carrie's laptop and the central question are used not to summarize and conclude each episode, but specifically to set up the multiplicity of meanings. Rather than closing the dialogue, the central question leaves room for more discussion or unique ways of approaching the issue. Some researchers have found that the ability to identify polysemic meanings is a gendered function of the text. Fiske has argued that "masculine" programmes are less open to multiple interpretations than "feminine" programmes, which tend to be more open and ambiguous. (Fiske, 1986) The *Doogie Howser* device would appeal more to the male audiences that Fiske describes that seek closure in a narrative, while the *Sex and the City* approach is more like that of the daytime serial, in which plots are left open-ended and questions are explored for the issues that they broach rather than how they are resolved.

Regardless of the criticism, this simple device provides a regular point in which identification and meaning can be created for the audience. This is achieved through voiceover address and film techniques that create a feminine gaze, creating multiple meanings that are constructed for each character and often left unresolved, and portraying women's relationship with technology as fluid and freeing, yet at the same time being helplessly dependent on its presence in their lives. In this way, *Sex and the City* not only creates meaning for single women who occupy various spaces and lifestyles, but also women in committed relationships and men, who might be able to create meaning for themselves by gaining the perspective of spectatorship or find a scenario that strikes a chord within themselves. While the show does not try to tackle issues of feminist activism nor does it regularly incorporate images of women of color, it is able to offer a "realistic" portrayal in which many in diverse circumstances can still find meaning and perspective on the complicated subject positions of single women in our society.

As with any textual analysis, the presence of techniques within a text is not the only way in which identification can be assessed. Future research should focus on the audiences' perception of the usage of the central theme, the identification with Carrie or other characters, and the resonance of the relationship with technology, and whether these techniques add up to what audiences consider a "realistic" portrayal.

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ESIG

The Elements of "Weekend Update": Informing and Influencing Through Late-Night Comedy

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Between 1975 and 1980 the news parody "Weekend Update" segment on "Saturday Night Live" reached a mass audience, disseminating alternative points of view on the sometimes important and sometimes outlandish events of the week. The writers and producers who filled the segment each week were in positions to have a great impact on the American social conscious at an important time in the country's history. The comedy news, whether the writers meant it to or not, became a news outlet for viewers, especially younger ones, and became influential on the political scene.[1] Because of the segment's nature, the supervising writers had to pay close attention to the traditional news media, but the "SNL" office in many ways started to resemble a real newsroom. The segment helped rejuvenate television creativity and expand restrictions from censors.

This study examined how key players, the writers and producers, constructed the first five years of "Weekend Update," including how they viewed the segment's role and purpose; how the segment's concept was developed; how the newscast was put together each week, such as how stories were selected and jokes were written; and what limitations censors and the show's comic nature had on the segment. To judge the segment's impact, the reactions of national media and political figures also were considered.

Most of the creative talent that founded "SNL" left the show after the 1979-1980 season, including creator, executive

producer, and writer Lorne Michaels, so this provides a natural bookend to study the early period of the show. There had been some attrition of the cast during the first seasons. Writer and performer Chevy Chase left after the first season to go to Hollywood. Performers John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd followed two years later.[2] But when Brandon Tartikoff took over as president of NBC Entertainment in January 1980, it set in motion the changing of the guard on "SNL."[3] Michaels and crew left because Tartikoff and NBC wanted more control of "SNL," and Michaels wanted the challenge of doing something new. Tartikoff instilled new producers who found a new cast for "SNL."[4]

Background

The National Broadcast Company first aired "Saturday Night Live" on October 11, 1975. From the start, the show's blend of political satire, social commentary, and outrageous humor impacted the lives of 30 million viewers per week and overall television content.[5] "SNL" brought back the live comedic variety show with its closest ancestors being programs such as "Your Show of Shows" from the 1950s.[6] Then, as it has for twenty-eight years, "SNL" aired three original ninety-minute programs per month, totaling about twenty per season. "Weekend Update," a news parody that usually lasts between five and ten minutes, was among the regular features of the sketch-comedy program. The parody features one or two performers dressed in newsperson attire - suits and dresses - sitting behind an anchor's desk, reading the news of the week that is accompanied by pictures,

copies of newspaper clippings, and graphics. While focusing the show on being comical, Michaels intended "SNL," and "Update" especially, to be considered a serious voice in the American political landscape and to serve an informational purpose.[7] By the time most of the creative team that put on "SNL" left the show in 1980, Michaels and his group had created a segment that influenced not only other comedy shows, but the news media, political campaigns, politicians, and how everyday Americans got their news.

"Weekend Update" was part of the "Saturday Night Live" blueprint from its earliest inception. A news parody segment was included as part of the show when Michaels pitched the idea to NBC, in part because he had a similar recurring skit on his variety show, "The Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour," on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. During preproduction for "SNL," even weeks before the premiere, he was slated to be the segment's anchor because of his prior experience. However, Chase was selected to replace Michaels behind the anchor desk because the producer was worried about being in an awkward situation when cutting other people's material from the show while performing and maintaining his own segment.[8] Others involved with the show's production also had experience with news parody, such as writer Herb Sargent, who oversaw "Update" for about twenty years, including the first five seasons, and who had worked on "That Was the Week That Was," a topical satirical comedy program that aired in the mid-1960s on NBC.[9]

Michaels started satirizing informational programming because that was what dominated the broadcast schedule on the CBC when he was getting his start in television in the late 1960s and early '70s. "Parody of [informational programming] was just a big part of Canadian television because it was the kind of programming that wasn't expensive and could be done relatively easily," he said.[10] In addition to working on "That Was the Week That Was," Sargent worked on "The Tonight Show" with Steve Allen and Johnny Carson, as well as other programs where topical humor played an important role. This experience is why he gravitated toward working on "Update" with "SNL."[11] Alan Zweibel was a writer at "SNL" during its first five seasons and second in command, or co-producer, with Sargent on "Update." Zweibel, who started as a joke writer and stand-up comic, focused on "Update" because the segment stuck with the familiar setup, punch-line form he knew.[12] These three men had the greatest impact on shaping what "Update" was for the program's first five seasons, and thus set the format of the segment, even into the twenty-first century. Comedian Al Franken was a writer and performer on "SNL" for fifteen seasons, including the first five years. He and writing partner Tom Davis were among the more active writers for "Update," Franken specifically submitting several jokes every week and occasionally writing commentary pieces.[13]

"Update" helped establish its first anchor, Chase, as the breakout star of the first season because he was on the air by

himself, using his real name. His popularity in turn helped increase attention for "Update" and was part of the reason it was given more time as the season went on. "The thought behind it, thematically, was, 'Here's an opportunity to do parody, to be funny as a newsman … and use that vehicle for satire to say damn well what I want on the news," Chase said.[14] He initially was hired for "SNL" solely as a writer and wrote much of his own material for "Update" with the supervision of Sargent and Zweibel. When Chase left after the first season, Jane Curtain took over as the "Update" anchor. She did not write any of her material and was often embarrassed by what was written for her because it frequently relied on sexual innuendo.[15] For the 1977-78 season Dan Aykroyd, who sometimes wrote, joined Curtain as co-anchor, although it was not something he enjoyed or was comfortable doing. However, the 1977-78 season did provide "Update" with a memorable catch phrase, "Jane, you ignorant slut," which was widely popular from the parody of "Point/Counterpoint" on CBS's "60 Minutes."[16] Bill Murray relieved Aykroyd of co-anchor duties in 1978, and the Curtain-Murray team delivered the news on "Update" until the mass exodus of the founders of "SNL" in 1980.

Getting started

For Michaels, the satire on "That Was the Week That Was" provided a good base for what he wanted for the "SNL" segment. "My feeling was that there was some element of that, or that there was a New York tradition of that; that in a shorter form,

like seven-minute length, [it] would play better for us," Michaels said. Other examples he kept in mind for "SNL" included the *New Yorker* or *Rolling Stone*.[17] Many of those involved with "Saturday Night Live" had spent time at both the "National Lampoon" radio show and magazine, including original head writer Michael O'Donoghue and performers Gilda Radner, Belushi, and Murray. There have been many comparisons made and similarities shown between "Lampoon" and "SNL." Both were humorous anti-establishment outlets. However, "Lampoon" had a more aggressive side, a darker outlook on the world. For example, while O'Donoghue was editor of the magazine, he wrote a piece giving suggestions to Vietnamese mothers on how to care for napalm burns. Michaels did not like the "Lampoon" style and wanted to stay away from it.[18] "There was a kind of male-ego sweat-socks attitude in it, which I never have really been a part of," he told *Rolling Stone* in 1979.[19] For Sargent, there were no direct influences on "Update" because news parody defines itself - "it's just a generic form." Zweibel agreed that there were no true influences from other programs or publications; "We just went with our gut."[20]

For the show, Michaels saw "Update" as a key point in the broadcast. First, some NBC affiliates would not start showing "SNL" until midnight and putting "Update" on at that time would give the show a second start. However, throughout the program's twenty-eight years, "Update" also has served as an incentive for people to continue watching through the first portion of

the show. "I think there are people who want to stay at least to see, in its current incarnation, what Tina [Fey] and Jimmy [Fallon] are going to do," Michaels said.[21] NBC executive Don Ohlmeyer expressed similar thoughts: knowing "Update" is coming sustains viewers. "That's part of the brilliance of Lorne's construction of the show - that you have this thing at midnight that would hold people there for the first half hour, even if some of the sketches in the first half hour weren't that strong."[22] Because "Update" was a popular segment, it unintentionally became the launching ground for most of the successful characters from the first five years of "SNL."

Shaped by the times

"SNL" was created in a turbulent time in American history, most notably for the scandal and forceful end of Richard Nixon's presidency as well as the end of the Vietnam War. These events influenced Michaels' inclusion of a news parody on "SNL," both for practical reasons and to make a statement on those events. "It was a very political time," he said. "We had all just gone through watching Watergate, you know, almost everyday, so people were very familiar with news and news anchors and how the news was presented."[23] To that end, he wanted his parody to seem real, even drawing the name "Weekend Update" from a similarly titled 10 o'clock newsbreak on NBC. "I didn't want anything that was a funny name or implied comedy," he said. "It was to be a news broadcast and satirical, but the top stories were to be the top stories."[24] Coming off recent

events, Michaels thought people were ready for a different take on the news. "With Ford being perceived as sort of a benign presence coming into office after Nixon, I think people were more open to a playful interpretation, were just more starved for a lighter tone because it had been so oppressive," he said.[25] Writer Neil Levy agreed that "SNL" gave people a release, a chance to laugh, coming off a time that had been negative. "America wasn't laughing," he said. "And this show came along and said it's okay to laugh, even to laugh at all the bad stuff."[26]

"Saturday Night Live" was part of the counterculture, and those who anchored and wrote for the show viewed it as a way to voice an opinion about the world around them to a mass audience.[27] "I was very interested in politics and also in the show being taken seriously as a voice about politics," Michaels said. "I think people in Washington started to pay attention to it very early on because it was frankly about them, and so the influence was pretty early, but it was very definitely a priority and very important to me that the show be taken seriously."[28] The show naturally bent toward serious, political topics because that is what the writers and producers were interested in and wanted to discuss, Michaels said. Franken agreed: "I'd tend to write stuff that was about big political stories, big real stories, current events that were important."[29] Also part of the appeal was attacking the institution of news on a national level or overplaying the

pompous local anchorman. "CBS had Walter Cronkite and NBC had John Chancellor; these were older, sort of stodgier, credible men, so there was an establishment aspect of it," Zweibel said.[30]

Even the catch phrase that Chase started to use every "Update" segment, "I'm Chevy Chase, and you're not," was based on the styles of real newscasts. He developed the line after watching a local newscast where the anchor started the show with the self-inflating, "I'm Roger Grimsby; here now the news."[31] It was discussed whether Chase should use a fake name, however, because of the devotion to keeping "Update" as real as possible, Michaels did not let this happen. The decision to have Chase use his real name made a statement about the segment, Zweibel said. "That in itself was sort of a breakthrough. There was an honesty about this, and there was," he said.[32] *Rolling Stone* picked up on this attention to reality and said it was part of what made the show succeed: "The show's slice-of-life quality, fired by a zest for realism, gives 'Saturday Night Live' its cutting edge of truth," the magazine said.[33]

Production and writing

A few writers, mainly Sargent and Zweibel, focused on "Update," while others contributed when they felt like it. "It was sort of like Herb's baby," Franken said.[34] Sargent paid constant attention to the news, reading a dozen newspapers per day and watching "as much news as you can on television" to

stay informed, he said.[35] However, the other writers viewed it as fun, adding a joke if they felt inspired through the week. Serious attention to writing "Update" did not start until Friday night or Saturday. "You'd go in and have coffee and oat muffins and start writing jokes," Franken said.[36] This was done partly because "Update" did not require extensive production after being written. As Zweibel said:

> It was vital part of the show, as it still is, but during the course of a production week it was almost an afterthought because the sketches had to be rehearsed and sets had to be built, and costumes and things like that, where "Update" was just a camera, or a couple of cameras trained with a couple of people sitting behind a desk. So production-wise, it was not demanding, so you can save it for the last minute.[37]

However, contributions were not limited to writers. Anyone could submit an "Update" joke, and enough contributions could help someone get a job as a writer later on. "Someone might be a research assistant or someone might be a receptionist … then at a certain point get hired to be a writer on the show because they've been writing for the show for weeks and months," Franken said.[38]

The other reason "Update" was not written until late in the week was because it was important that the jokes were as up to date as possible, which showed some similarities between the "Update" newsroom and a traditional news program. On Saturday evenings the cast would run through a full dress rehearsal starting around 7:30 p.m. When the rehearsal finished, sketches

would be reworked. After the changes were made to the rest of the show, Zweibel turned his attention to keeping "Update" fresh:

> I would go upstairs in my office and watch the news at 11 o'clock, and if there was some late-breaking news, whether it would be a late World Series game, just anything in the world or whatever, we'd write jokes. It was sort of cool, because you'd see something on TV at a quarter after 11 and at a quarter after 12, we're putting it on TV as a joke, you know. That happened a number of times. It just made sense.[39]

In fact, there were a few occasions where jokes were so new that Zweibel hid under the anchor desk and handed fresh material to Chase while he was live on the air. This occurred again later with Curtain.[40] However, because "Update" was not written until the other sketches were finished, that also meant less time could be focused on perfecting the segment. "[Chase] had to go on half the time with very thin material sometimes because everybody was too burnt out to get to it or whatever and he made it shine," Michaels said.[41]

In the "SNL" newsroom, the writers had a full assortment of Associated Press and United Press International photographs coming in directly to the office via wire services. Like a real newsroom, how a story could be represented visually played into the selection process. "If somebody had an idea they'd just throw it in, and we'd collect them and pick out the ones that'd work best and the ones that could be illustrated," Sargent said.[42] On Saturdays the writers also looked over a table full

of newspapers, searching for stories. A list was complied of the big stories of the week that needed to be addressed. The key was, "Taking some information and giving it a twist or a throttle," Sargent said.[43] However, it was not only the big stories that writers tried to get into the show. "Maybe other people would be interested more in stories that were not necessarily the big news story but were more about small things, minor stuff, those little stories that were funny or involving a penis or something," Franken said.[44] However, the team never reported something that did not have some sort of factual basis. "I don't think we ever made up a news story; we'd find something that was perhaps obscure and make it more important that it probably was," Michaels said.[45] "I always felt that the show - at its best - was a record of what had gone on that week in the country, the world, and in the lives of the people doing the show."[46]

Information vs. comedy

While they were careful to have one foot in reality and despite Michaels' desire to inform, the writers did not see that as their prime responsibility. "You just wanted to get some laughs," Sargent said.[47] Even more specifically, Franken said the writers did not see what they were doing as educational, because they never said, " 'I'm going to write a joke so people who don't know this in America will know it.' No, you didn't do that."[48] However, whether it was intentional or not, "Weekend Update" did inform people, as the writers

found out. "You didn't think of that, but you'd usually hear that," Sargent said. "People would say they'd heard about this major story only on 'Update.'"[49] Researcher Barry Hollander established in 1995 that late-night entertainment programs increasingly play a part in people's knowledge of politics and public affairs.[50] Because some people got their news from "Update," the writers had to consider this while writing their jokes. "It meant that you had to assume a lower level of news literacy for the 'Saturday Night Live' audience than you could assume for doing a dinner in Washington or something," Franken said.[51] Determining the audience's knowledge level was important, Sargent said, because the basic information about a story needed to be known to be able to tell a joke about the subject. "You don't want to have to explain your premise every time you do a story, so you try to pick things that you think most people know, are aware of the facts or the basis of the story at least," he said.[52]

Not only did the audience learn from people who were not intending to be teachers, but the teachers were being taught as they went. "Some of the cast would learn from it because many of them were apolitical and some were Canadian who couldn't vote anyway," Sargent said.[53] Even those who were interested in politics learned from "Update" occasionally. So overwhelmed was he by the long hours during the first months of the show that Michaels told the *New York Times* in 1976, "I worry about losing touch with the real world out there. I don't know anything but

this show. I've been reduced to hearing the news from Chevy's 'Update' segment. Now, that's a frightening thought."[54] Showing that the patterns from the program's early years still play out, current "Update" co-anchor Jimmy Fallon expressed similar sentiments. "Honestly, when they asked me if I wanted to do it, I had no idea about the news or anything. I don't read," he said. "Now I find out the news through setups we do for jokes."[55]

Influence

While the informative value of "Update" is a topic of disagreement among those who produced the show, they all were aware that the segment had a great influence on people's perception of the issues being discussed. "Not only would it make people laugh, but, 'Gee, if it's worthy of being on this show, maybe it's a bigger story than I thought,'" Zweibel said.[56] For a concrete example of how *SNL* influenced public perception, Franken turned to the impact Chase had with his prodding of President Gerald Ford with both "Update" jokes and sketches during the rest of the show:

> Like what Chevy managed to do … was make Ford look clumsy, and you know he's probably the most athletic president in the history of the country. He was the University of Michigan All-American center. And so you can make the argument that he was actually the greatest athlete in the history of the White House and yet somehow it stuck that he was this awkward bumbler.[57]

This influence took Sargent by surprise. "You'd talk to people who'd say, 'You changed my mind,' or, 'I didn't know about it,'

and you'd say, 'But that was just a sketch or just a joke,' and they'd say, 'Yeah, but it told us something,'" he said.[58] Instead of trying to change people's minds with their jokes, the writers viewed "Update" as a forum to spark discussion. "I think it's not just a valid way, but a good way to get people thinking," Franken said. While "SNL" and the "Update" segment were based on counterculture values, and those putting on the show had fervent liberal beliefs, there were no cases where the writers or performers tried to address or satirize specific subjects. "Topics usually told you whether or not they wanted to be in the show as opposed to, 'Hey, let's try to get this kind of thing in,' " Zweibel said.[59]

Sensitive topics and the censors

One issue a topical news parody must deal with is finding the appropriate response to a serious event, such as a notable death or natural disaster. No topics were automatically off-limits to "SNL" writers, Michaels said. However, the task for a humor program or writer is to find the statement that is within standards of taste. "The writer's job is to find a way into it that isn't just, that doesn't make light of the tragedy or the victims," he said. "You just have to be bright enough to find a way into it."[60] However, the network censors did not always share Michaels' viewpoint. Some events provoked fights with censors over what was the right way into a story or if there was a way into a particular story at all, Zweibel said:

> If there were an earthquake in Mexico that morning, and we wanted to do an earthquake joke, the censors might say, "Hey guys, come on, they're not even fucking cold yet - the bodies - you can't do it," and we would probably pull off from that. But to make fun of Francisco Franco being dead when he was a dictator, it'd be like if Saddam Hussein died today. I don't think anybody would feel badly and say you can't make a joke about Saddam Hussein's death. I can't imagine anybody saying that. So it depended on the person and the circumstances, and we would police ourselves, but usually on a humor level. On a topic level, we waited for others to say, "No, you can't," and then decided whether we were going to fight it or not.[61]

Another determinate of what made it on "Update" for each broadcast was the studio audience's reaction to jokes during dress rehearsal. An adverse reaction would make the writers and producers examine what they were saying in the joke and decide if it was something that they really wanted to say despite the reaction. In this way there was an extra layer of possible censorship to a particular news item and whether the at-home audience would be exposed to the "SNL" point of view on an issue.[62]

The audience may have had more of a chilling effect than the censors. While there would be disputes, the censors did not have as many issues with the politically centered "Update" as they would with some of the racier skits during the rest of the show. "Censors, of course, had their hands full with ninety minutes of stuff to worry about," Sargent said.[63] The overriding thought was that political commentary had little risk of offending viewers compared with discussions of religion or

sexual boundaries. "I don't think anybody cared if we called the president a jerk, not that I think that we did," Michaels said.[64] When the censors did take issue with a particular joke, it did not stop the writers from making the same basic point. "There were times when we had to be maybe a little bit more clever in getting our point across because we weren't allowed to say certain words and certain other things might have been taboo," Zweibel said.[65]

The censors did pay attention when a person was quoted in a story. Again making the "SNL" writers like that of the journalists they were parodying, quotes could not be purely fiction. "If you put words in someone's mouth and said that they said this, quote unquote, that became a subject for the legal department," Zweibel said. "As opposed to saying, 'was reported to have said.'"[66] This differs from the standards present on programs such as "The Daily Show with Jon Stewart" or even the current version of "Update," where facts and quotes can have loose attribution. "They can make up numbers and fudge around with things, but at the time, anything that was on the air [the censors] said, 'Wait a minute, you can't say that about so and so because it's not true,' which doesn't apply anymore," Sargent said. "It didn't stop us too much. We got around it somehow."[67]

Part of the fun of the show for the writers was getting the chance to push the limits of television and the censors. Because of its 11:30 p.m. start, the show was able to get away

with much more than the average primetime show, providing skits and jokes that were seen as shocking and sometimes outright racy.[68] In one particular instance on "Update," the character of Emily Latella, played by Radner, came on to do a commentary, and the joke was that she did not have the right topic for what she wanted to talk about. For example she would speak on presidential erections instead of presidential elections, and then at the end of her speech the error would be pointed out and she would say, "never mind." After a while the formula got tired and writer Zweibel wanted to do something different, so after the error was pointed out he wanted Latella to call the anchor, Curtain, a bitch. This caused a big uproar with the censor, but it provided Zweibel with some amusement:

> Back then to say "bitch" on television, it was just not done. And I remember, I know Lorne spoke to the censor about it. I also made up some story to the censor that, "No, no, no, she's not using the noun form, she's not calling her a bitch, she's saying the adverb form, 'You're acting bitchy toward me,' which you can do." I made up this whole story, this crock of shit that for some reason the censor just bought. It was getting stuff by the censors, that was fun, that was challenging, just to try to expand the parameters of everything.[69]

The success of the show also played a part in allowing such cases to occur. When the show first went on the air, actors could not say something along the lines of "that sucks," but because "SNL" was a hit, the efforts it made to push the limits extended the standards for all of television. Language changed so that what was said on the air was more like what the people at home were saying.[70]

Not only did Zweibel enjoy seeing how he could challenge the censors in terms of use of language, but he also enjoyed the challenge of getting things on the show that just happened and hitting revered targets. For example, the television-star horse Mr. Ed died in the early morning hours of a Saturday show day. When the writer heard the news, his first thoughts were how they could use this on "Update." He came up with the idea to interview the grieving widow, "Mrs. Ed." So around 2:00 a.m. Saturday, he started searching for a white horse to pose as Mrs. Ed, and found one, and it made it on the show that night. "It was stuff that was in the moment and stuff that would be fun and the challenge of 'let's see if we can do it,'" he said. "It was also the fun of poking fun at sacred cows."[71] He also pointed to mocking past-their-prime stars such as Lucille Ball, "gravel voiced and a chain smoker," or Elizabeth Taylor, "choking on a chicken leg or a turkey leg," as examples of exploring areas that might have seemed off limits.[72]

Critical response

In the 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* author Neil Postman lamented that America had become a culture where leisure was king and no one paid attention to serious news anymore; in fact, few news sources presented the news the way it should be and instead package news as entertainment. To Postman, dessert was the main course of public discourse, and "SNL" was a parfait.[73] Those involved with putting on the show were not the only ones who viewed it as an influential,

important point in television. The *New York Times'* television critic John O'Connor attributed part of the show's strength to its daring and willingness to push the limits. "The general effectiveness of the show's political satire is directly related to its ability to be outrageous or simply naughty," he wrote in a review of the first season of the show.[74] He lavished praise on "Update" and its use of breaking news stories, but the strongest comment he made was, "For however long it lasts, 'Saturday Night' is the most creative and encouraging thing to happen in American TV comedy since 'Your Show of Shows.'"[75] *Rolling Stone* called the show a breakthrough in television comedy.[76] Pulitzer Prize-winning television critic Tom Shales praised "SNL" for bringing new audiences to television and rejuvenating the medium after the program's first four seasons. "It is a reminder that television done right can be as splendid as anything," he wrote.[77]

Praise for "SNL" was not limited to media outlets. Comedy writer Mitch Glazer commented, "In a sense, it's an experiment to see what can be done with entertainment on television, what's possible; and at its best it challenges everything that television is."[78] Actor Tom Hanks described "SNL" as a cultural phenomenon, an important social ritual that people made a point to watch and was as big as the Beatles had been ten years earlier.[79] New York City's former Mayor Rudolph Giuliani praised the program's political humor and its work on Ford.[80] Political activist Ralph Nader, who hosted the show during the second

season, praised the show and "Update" specifically for its social commentary. "I think over time, there've been a lot of stupid and gross things on 'Saturday Night Live,' but it does get across some current events with its skits and its 'Weekend Update,' " he said. "When the culture decays and the communications media decay, then something as weak as a .275 hitter on 'Saturday Night Live' shines."[81] The head of Ronald Regan's advertising campaign for the 1980 presidential election, Elliot Curson, also viewed "SNL" as having a more important impact on public perception than any advertisement. "They say what's really on people's minds," he told the *New York Times* in 1980. "When 'Saturday Night Live' portrays one candidate as dumb, another as a bumbler, the audience is bound to say, 'Well, maybe they're right; maybe these guys don't quite have it.'"[82]

Effects of "Update"

What "Update" and "SNL" started to do was set up a show that had to be taken seriously by politicians and their advisers. At a correspondents' dinner in Washington, D.C., Senator Eugene McCarthy told Michaels that the show and "Update" jokes made about senators was the first topic of conversation each Monday on the Senate floor.[83] Other political candidates started to turn to "SNL" to get attention for their campaigns. By the middle of the first season, President Ford's press secretary, Ron Nessen, hosted the show in an attempt to ease the damage the show was inflicting with its portrayal of

the president.[84] For that episode Michaels and the crew went to Washington and filmed Ford saying the famous, "Live, from New York," line and also "I'm Gerald Ford, and you're not" to parody Chase who parodied the president.[85] Nessen's attempt to mitigate the damage did not work, and the show came off as harsh and extreme. The attitude of the writers was, "The president's watching. Let's make him squirm," said writer Rosie Shuster.[86] Nessen later wrote a piece for the *New York Times* acknowledging the impact "SNL" and other comedy shows had on public opinion. He thought accepting and acknowledging the work of satirists, and in Ford's case, "SNL" in particular, was important to keeping a steady political image.[87]

In Nessen's article he traced political humor to Mark Twain and Will Rogers among others, establishing the tradition and place punsters have had in American political thought. Michaels traced this tradition through to "Update" being the television-age version of Twain or Rogers and an important role in opinion shaping.

> It became a place that people checked out; if there was a thing that was controversial, people wanted to know what we thought about it, and I think that credibility is the thing we're most proud of….Our best move is when there's something that's just happened and it's what the country's thinking about and talking about and we're able to respond to it.[88]

Michaels likened "Update" to political cartoons and said, "That's a big part of how Americans define democracy."[89] To this end, he saw his show among the first level of media outlets and tried to encourage good political writing because of this. "I

didn't think that we should be taken any less seriously than any news magazine or any periodical or anything in print or any other television show," he said.[90] Part of that credibility came from the context and reputation the show earned for getting things right, Michaels said. Because of the work he and his staff did during the early years of "SNL," late-night shows have become a part of the necessary campaign stops for presidential candidates. Nader was a candidate in 2000 when the Republican candidate, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, and the Democratic candidate, Vice President Al Gore, appeared on "SNL." "The whole thing in 2000 was bizarre," Nader said. "Here you have this serious presidential campaign, and all of us had to go on these comedy shows like 'Saturday Night Live,' because that was the only way we could have more than a sound bite and reach a large audience."[91]

Not only did Michaels and his writers have an impact on the political landscape, but they also impacted media operations. In 1976 KTTV in Los Angeles introduced "MetroNews, MetroNews," a half-hour local news program where professional journalists were purposely delivering the news with an attempt to be funny. William Sheehan, the president of ABC's News department at the time, said that he thought the show was funnier than Chase and "Update," however, he thought it was a bad idea that could cost broadcast journalism its credibility.[92] Michaels did not see the immediate impact of "Update," but he thought the segment has impacted today's political writers

because they were part of the generation that grew up watching the show and its political barbs. Zweibel thought it would be tough to be a writer for "Update" now because broadcast journalism has changed. "The years that I was there, it was easier to parody because the actual news shows were very, very straight," he said. "Now the actual news shows are in themselves very relaxed, they're parodies of themselves."[93] The "Update" segment also left an impression on how people recalled the "Point/Counterpoint" portion from "60 Minutes" because Curtain and Aykroyd had parodied it so well on "SNL." When it was announced in March 2003 that former President Bill Clinton and former Senator Bob Dole would revive the "60 Minutes" segment, many stories brought up the parody.[94]

Notes

[1] Tom Shales and James Andrew Miller, *Live From New York* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2002) page 13 of center photo section (no page number); and Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[2] Michiko Kakutani, " 'Saturday Night' Returns for 'Completely New' Year," *New York Times*, October 13, 1979.

[3] Tony Schwartz, "A Young Division Chief At NBC Looking for Hits," *New York Times*, April 24, 1980.

[4] Tony Schwartz, " 'Saturday Night Live' Loses Cast and Producer," *New York Times*, June 17, 1980.

[5] Marianne Partridge, ed., *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live* (Garden City, New Jersey: Dolphin Books, Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979), 9. Watching "Saturday Night Live" became a weekly event, or as the book stated, "thirty million people tailored their weekend socializing to fit the show's 11:30 to 1:00 schedule.

[6] Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live* (New York: Beech Tree Books William Morrow, 1986), 41. "Your Show of Shows" was a "classic" comedy variety show starring Sid Casear that ran on Saturday nights on NBC from 1950 to 1955.

[7] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003. "That Was the Week That Was" ran from January 1964 to May 1965 and was based on a highly successful British program of the same name. Both the American and English versions were hosted by David Frost.

[10] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[11] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[12] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[13] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003.

[14] Michael Cader, ed., *Saturday Night Live: The First Twenty Years* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994),13.

[15] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night*, 91.

[16] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 158.

[17] Partridge, *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live*, 179, and Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[18] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night*, 51-53.

[19] Partridge, *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live*, 187.

[20] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003, and Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[21] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[22] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 443.

[23] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 51.

[27] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[28] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[29] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003, and Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[30] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[31] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night*, 131-32.

[32] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003, and Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[33] Partridge, *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live*, 11.

[34] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003.

[35] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[36] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003.

[37] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[38] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003.

[39] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[40] Ibid. In one notable instance, "SNL" was being shot live at Mardi Gras in New Orleans. While "Update" was going on a parade was supposed to be passing by behind the anchors, but there had been an accident at the beginning of the parade route and there was no parade. To fill time Zweibel had to go under the desk and start writing jokes.

[41] Partridge, *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live,* 189.

[42] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003.

[45] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[46] Partridge, *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live,* 182.

[47] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[48] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003.

[49] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[50] Barry Hollander. 'The New News and the 1992 Presidential Campaign: Perceived vs. Actual Political Knowledge," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly,* 72, 1995, 786-798.

[51] Telephone interview, Al Franken, February 14, 2003.

[52] Ibid.

[53] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[54] Peter Andrews, "'Saturday Night' Never Plays It Safe," *New York Times*, February 29, 1976.

[55] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 441.

[56] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[59] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[60] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[61] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[64] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[65] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[66] Ibid.

[67] Telephone interview, Herb Sargent, February 24, 2003.

[68] Tom Shales, "Wild, Exciting, Daring - That's 'Saturday Night,'" *Washington Post*, May 31, 1978.

[69] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[70] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 95.

[71] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

[74] John J. O'Connor, "NBC 'Saturday Night' Meets Ford People," *New York Times*, April 19, 1976.

[75] John J. O'Connor, "Sprightly Mix Brightens NBC's 'Saturday Night,'" *New York Times*, November 30, 1975.

[76] Partridge, *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live*, 11.

[77] Tom Shales, "'Saturday Night': Finally Ready for Prime Time," *Washington Post*, January 10, 1979.

[78] Partridge, *Rolling Stone Visits Saturday Night Live*, 10.

[79] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 96.

[80] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 449.

[81] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 440.

[82] Bernard Weinraud, "New Reagan Adviser Is Putting Stress on Issue Ads," *New York Times*, March 15, 1980.

[83] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night*, 184.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[86] Hill and Weingrad, *Saturday Night*, 184.

[87] Ron Nessen, "Political Wisecracks: Some Front-Runners," *New York Times*, December 5, 1979.

[88] Telephone interview, Lorne Michaels, March 4, 2003.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Shales and Miller, *Live From New York*, 448.

[92] Les Brown, "Notes: Is the Zany Newscast A Threat to the Real Thing?" *New York Times*, June 20, 1976.

[93] Telephone interview, Alan Zweibel, February 11, 2003.

[94] Bill Carter, "Clinton and Dole Agree to Debate On Weekly '60 Minutes'0 Segment," *New York Times*, March 6, 2003.

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Crime, Romance and Sex:
Washington Women Journalists in Recent Popular Fiction

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Washington Women Journalists in Recent Popular Fiction

ABSTRACT

This study of thirteen novels portraying Washington women journalists finds their portrayals have improved since 1990 when one authority concluded that most novels showed women as "unfulfilled unfortunates." The fictional women in this study, featured most prominently in detective stories, are eager to expose male corruption to further their careers but make little effort to change underlying social causes. These women are searching for relationships, but their careers still take precedence.

Introduction

More than a decade ago, Loren Ghiglione, in one of the most comprehensive studies of the images of American journalists, declared that "only rarely does contemporary fiction portray a woman journalist as a whole human being."[1] He concluded these exceptions occurred mainly in detective stories. According to Ghiglione, this genre featured women journalists as crime solvers and only to a limited extent showed them as "something other than unfulfilled unfortunates in need of a man."[2] Since contemporary fiction primarily is an entertainment vehicle reaching a mass market of millions in both hardcover and paperback sales, it is logical to assume that the public draws its image of women in journalism in part from popular novels. Therefore, the depiction of women journalists seems to be a worthwhile topic for academic research.

Consequently, we decided to see if Ghiglione's conclusion regarding the sorry depiction of women journalists in fiction still holds true in 2003. Is the woman journalist in popular fiction mainly interested in her relationships with males? Or have the rare exceptions of Ghiglione's study now become much more the norm? Has the portrayal of fictional women journalists changed as women increasingly have moved up the journalistic ranks with 34 percent of newsroom supervisory positions being held by women at the start of the twenty-first century?[3] Their portrayal might be expected to do so, since as feminist critic Joanna Russ has put it, "Authors do not make their plots up out

[1] Loren Ghiglione, *The American Journalist: Paradox of the Press* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1990), 124.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Maurine H. Beasley and Sheila J. Gibbons, *Taking Their Place: A Documentary History of Women and Journalism* 2nd ed. (State College, PA: Strata Publishing Co., 2003), 248.

of thin air."[4] Russ took the position that fiction portrays the values of a male-dominated culture, but she also pointed out that "novels, especially, depend upon what central action can be imagined as being performed by the protagonist – i.e., what can a central character do in a book?"[5] At this point surely women can be "imagined" as doing a variety of activities other than stereotypical man hunting, especially since many novels about journalists are written by journalists themselves. It seems logical to assume that as women actually play a larger role in journalism, fictional portrayals increasingly should show them as strong and independent persons.

To test this hypothesis we decided to look at the fictional portrayal of Washington women journalists since 1990. We limited our study to Washington journalists for two main reasons: (1) Since the early 1990s Washington novels featuring journalists have been listed under Library of Congress subject headings, so it is relatively easy to locate books in this category, and (2) the journalistic corps in the nation's capital constitutes "an elite group," according to Rem Rieder, editor of the *American Journalism Review.*[6] Consequently, it appears that if the portrayal of any group of women journalists has changed from stereotypical to realistic depictions, this most likely would be the one. We also thought it would be useful to see to what degree the impact of changing communications technologies have had on fictional women journalists. In addition, we wanted to examine the intersections of race, class and gender in their portrayals.

[4] Joanna Russ, "What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write," in *To Write Like a Woman* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 80.
[5] Ibid., 81.
[6] Personal interview by a co-author with Rem Rieder, College Park, MD., Jan. 10, 2003.

Books Used

We found the following fourteen novels published from 1990 to date by a catalogue search using a subject heading of Washington women journalists (books are listed in order of publication date):

Special Interests, Linda Cashdan (1990); *Happy Endings*, Sally Quinn (1991); *Knight and Day*, Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman (1995); *Press Corpse*, Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman (1996); *Death of a Garden Pest*, Ann Ripley (1996); *Hidden Agenda*, Thom Racina (1997); *The Murder Lover*, Ellen Rawlings (1997), *Deadly Harvest*, Ellen Rawlings (1997), *Death with Honors*, Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman (1998); *The Ultimatum*, T. Davis Bunn (1999); *The Golden Age*, Gore Vidal (2000); *The Sky is Falling*, Sidney Sheldon (2000); *Journey*, Danielle Steel (2000); *Special Interest*, Chris Benson (2001).[7] Thirteen were used for our study (the Vidal novel was excluded because the woman journalist, a publisher, depicted in it was not presently engaged in journalism.)[8] All of the fourteen books were aimed at general readers and published in hardback except for the two by Rawlings, which appeared only in paperback. Most of the others also were issued in paperback.

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[7] See Linda Cashdan, *Special Interests* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990); Sally Quinn, *Happy Endings* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman, *Knight & Day* (New York: Forge, 1995); Ann Ripley, *Death of a Garden Pest* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman, *Press Corpse* (New York: Forge, 1996); Thom Racina, *Hidden Agenda* (New York: Dutton, 1999); Ellen Rawlings, *The Murder Lover* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997); Ellen Rawlings, *Deadly Harvest* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997); Ron Nessen and Johanna Neuman, *Death With Honors* (New York: Forge, 1998); T. Davis Bunn, *The Ultimatum* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson , 1999, reprinted as part of *The Reluctant Prophet*, 2001); Gore Vidal, *The Golden Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2000) ; Sidney Sheldon, *The Sky Is Falling* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000); Danielle Steel, *Journey* (New York: Delacorte Press, 2000); Chris Benson, *Special Interest* (Chicago: Third World Press, 2001).

[8] Vidal's *The Golden Age* received more serious attention from reviewers than the other works. It is the last in Vidal's American Chronicle series. The newspaper publishing career of the character Caroline de Traxler Sanford figures prominently in earlier novels in the series (which were beyond the scope of this study), but is barely mentioned in this work.

Nine of the books, those by Ripley, Nesson and Neuman, Racina, Rawlings, Sheldon and Benson, fall into the mystery genre and were written by authors with backgrounds in either journalism or television. This is in line with the general popularity of mysteries among the reading public, since mystery fiction "garners, according to recent statistics, 21 or 22 per cent of all sales in the United States." [9] In the cases of Ripley, Nesson and Neuman, and Rawlings, the mysteries were parts of series. (This is in keeping with the detective genre in which series are far more common than single works.) Ripley's book moves her detective character, Louise Eldridge, a master gardener, into a Washington setting for the first time. The three books by Nessen, a former White House television correspondent and press secretary to former President Gerald Ford, and Neuman, former White House correspondent for *USA TODAY*, are subtitled *Knight & Day* mysteries. They present an intrepid couple, Jerry Knight, a radio talk show host, and Jane Day, a *Washington Post* reporter, teaming up to solve crimes. Rawlings' books feature the same main character, Rachel Crowne, a free-lance journalist whose curiosity leads her to trap murderers.

The other books on Washington women journalists represent varied genres. Bunn's book, characterized as Christian fiction, pictures faithful, god-fearing churchgoers converting an unemployed woman television broadcaster and triumphing over evil secular forces.[10] The book by Cashdan, a journalist, is billed as a Washington novel of sex, power and love centered on a radio reporter. It is somewhat akin to Quinn's *Happy Endings*, a romantic suspense novel that is a sequel to her previous book, *Regrets Only*.

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[9] Kathleen Gregory Klein, ed. *Women Times Three* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Press, 1995):3.

Her work reflects her familiarity with *The Washington Post* where she wrote feature stories before marrying the executive editor, Ben Bradlee. The remaining book, *Journey*, categorized as psychological fiction, is the fiftieth written by popular romance novelist Danielle Steel.

Four of the authors are men: Racina, Sheldon, Benson, Bunn. Four are women: Cashdan, Ripley, Quinn, Steel. Three novels are coauthored by a male, Nessen, and a female, Neumann. One author, Benson, is an African American. With this split in the gender of the authors in mind, we wanted to determine whether the women protagonists in the books by women authors acted differently (were more empowered and independent) than the protagonists in the books written by men or in the coauthored novels.

Literature Review

Women journalists rarely appeared in American novels during the greater part of the nineteenth century. In fact journalist Sara Payson Parton, who wrote under the name Fanny Fern, wrote one of the earliest novels featuring a female journalist; *Ruth Hall, A Domestic Tale of the Present Time*, was written in 1855.[11] By the 1890s newswomen became more popular as protagonists. In the twentieth century they were often the subjects of newspaper novels, films and comic strips. According to Ghiglione, these women have been

> expected to hunger for a good man or a family as much as for a good story. If they don't, they are dismissed as unfulfilled—women who might

[10] *The Ultimatium* was published in T. Davis Bunn, *The Reluctant Prophet: Two Bestsellers in One Volume: The Warning and The Ultimatum* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publisher, 2001). *The Warning* has no references to women journalists.
[11] Ghiglione, *The American Journalist, Paradox of the Press* , 122-123.

> as well be men. If they do pursue men, they are rejected as women, not serious about their career—dependent women who rely on men for self-fulfillment. Fiction, for the most part, still suggests the best place for a woman is not in the newsroom.[12]

The scholar who perhaps has best studied the representations of journalists in the mass media is Howard Good. He has written on the image of the journalist in film, fiction and autobiography.[13] Of particular interest to this study is Good's work on fiction and gender. In his book *Acquainted with the Night*, Good argued that fiction can be a valuable source for historians, offering "a symbolic and subjective account of journalism" that "constitutes a kind of diary of the attitudes and tensions and dreams of the society that produced and consumed it."[14] Newspaper fiction is sometimes autobiographical and often reflects an anxiety about the status of journalism, Good wrote. In all, journalists are endowed with unusual investigative powers to seek out wrong doers, giving fiction the power to explain "away the social chaos of our times as the work of a handful of conspirators, and so absolv[ing] the rest of us."[15]

Good explicitly examined gender in *Girl Reporter, Gender, Journalism and the Movies*. This work primarily examines the Torchy Blane movie series produced between 1937 and 1939, and thus is outside the scope of this paper. However, in explaining the occurrence of the girl reporter in the 1920s and 30s, Good wrote that in the genre of newspaper films, "journalism functions as a vehicle for exploring certain gender-based

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[12] Ibid., 127.
[13] Howard Good, *Acquainted with the Night: The Image of Journalists in American Fiction, 1890-1930* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1986), Howard Good, *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1989), Howard Good, *The Journalist as Autobiographer* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1993), Howard Good, *Girl Reporter: Gender, Journalism and the Movies* (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 1998), Howard Good, "The Image of War Correspondents in Anglo-American Fiction," in *Journalism Monographs*, ed. Joseph P. McKerns (July, 1986).
[14] Good, *Acquainted with the Night*, 96.
[15] Ibid., 103.

conflicts—career versus marriage, workplace versus home, co-workers versus family, freedom of the night versus middle-class domesticity."[16]

We located one study that specifically examined the representations of women journalists in fiction. This unpublished 1981 study by Donna Born, titled "The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction 1890 to Present," examined representations of women journalists in novels and short stories from 1890 to 1980. Born found that female heroines tended to be portrayed as "competent, independent, courageous, and compassionate professional,"[17] though they often experienced conflict between their personal and professional lives. In most cases the heroine appeared to be "better than female—or more like the male—thus explaining her professional ability as well as her loss of personal happiness."[18]

Born argued that literary themes reflect the feminism of the era in which they were written. Fictional heroines during World War II, for example, depended on men for security and protection, while at the same time the women were committed to their profession. After the war, she found women journalists were judged by success in personal relationships rather than in professional terms, although there was more recognition in fiction of professional accomplishments. Born's study contained few references to Washington women journalists in general. It ended, however, with references to Allan Drury's *Anna Hastings*, a novel that showed an unscrupulous woman

[16] Good, *Girl Reporter*, 30.
[17] Donna Born. "The Image of the Woman Journalist in American Popular Fiction 1890 to the Present." Association for Education in Journalism. Michigan State University, East Lansing, August 1981, 24.
[18] Ibid., 25.

who lost her family as she clawed her way to the top of a media empire in a relentless quest for power and prestige.[19]

A more recent study titled "Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative" makes note of the increasing prevalence of women journalists (and other female media workers, such as television producers and public relations professionals) in modern works of fiction. In the genre she calls "the single woman narrative," Deborah Philips argues that heroines of these novels are university educated, and that these jobs in the "glamorous end of the middle-class professions" give women the disposable income needed to build a life of consumption.[20](Philips notes that single woman novels themselves confuse the lines between fiction and journalism—books such as *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones' Diary* began as newspaper columns.)[21] Concerned with designer furniture and clothes, these women's lives are shaped by the "style journalism" in magazines such as *Elle*, *Marie Claire*, *Vogue* and *GQ*.[22] These women, armed with an expectation of labels and luxury, confuse their desire for a man with the commodities he is expected to provide. Women in these novels benefit from the independence and work opportunities won by second-wave feminism, but do not challenge gender and patriarchal norms.[23] Their desire is to find male providers who can buy more for them than they can by themselves.

To a degree we found evidence of this approach to consumption in the books on Washington women journalists. Most of the books studied except Bunn's work referred

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[19] See Allen Drury, *Anna Hastings: The Story of a Washington Newspaperperson* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1977).
[20] Deborah Philips, "Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative," *Women: A Cultural Review* 11, no. 3 (2000): 239.
[21] Ibid., 241.
[22] Ibid., 240, 242.
[23] Ibid., 240, 248-51.

to a greater or lesser extent to the kinds of clothing worn by the protagonists and the style of decorating in their homes. More significant, however, was the fact that many of the books are part of the mystery/detective genre. Feminism and female heroines have come slowly to this genre, writes Birgitta Berglund.[24] She argued that until recently the majority of detective protagonists were men since the notion of a woman taking charge went against traditional expectations. Independent and assertive women were often cast as villains, not heroines. During the first half of the 20th century, if a writer created a female heroine, it was common for her to be the detective's romantic interest. Sometimes a heroine of a detective novel was cast as a spinster, "so completely harmless and endearing, and so essentially feminine in her ways and manners, that she can get away with murder—or at least the detection of murder—without threatening male authority."[25]

In the past few years Berglund argued women detectives have been independent professionals committed to their careers as academics, teachers or journalists. In view of successful writing in this genre, Berglund has forecast an increasingly positive role for women: "The tough private eye will become more vulnerable, perhaps even be allowed to have a family, while the gentle spinster will turn out to have been a feminist all the time; and we will see more 'ordinary' women who juggle families and careers while staying in charge of the case."[26]

Kathleen Klein, the foremost feminist critic of mysteries, however, has viewed the future less sanguinely: "The feminist detective winds up supporting the existing system which oppresses women when she reestablishes the ordered status quo.... Adopting the

[24] Birgitta Berglund, "Desires and Devices: On Women Detectives in Fiction," in *The Art of Detective Fiction*, ed. Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales, and Robert Vilain (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 138-51.
[25] Ibid., 145.

formula traps their authors."[27] In another work she noted that since detectives by definition enter the male world, the phrase "woman detective" is "an oxymoron – if female, then not detective; if detective, then not really female. Or perhaps I should say she either is or is not Woman."[28]

This paper seeks to draw on the concepts articulated by these authors to examine the fictional depiction of Washington women journalists in an effort to see whether the portrayal of women in recent years has shifted to give women more recognition as autonomous individuals. It recognizes, however, that such a study is inherently limited because fiction is not necessarily a valid reproduction of reality. As Michele Barrett has pointed out, "We may learn much, from an analysis of novels, about the ways in which meaning was constructed in a particular historical period, but our knowledge will not add up to a general knowledge of that social formation."[29] Barrett cautions us to beware of the processes that reproduce gender ideology in various periods, such as stereotyping – imagery that represents the "wish-fulfillment of patriarchy" and compensation – "the presentation of imagery and ideas that tend to elevate the 'moral value' of femininity."[30]

Washington women journalists as mystery detectives

The nine novels in which Washington women journalists play the role of detectives emphasize the relationship of their profession to their investigative activities. Although the women are engaged in various types of journalism—two are newspaper

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[26] Ibid., 150.
[27] Kathleen Gregory Klein, *The Woman Detective: Gender and Genre* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995),
[28] Kathleen Gregory Klein, "Habeas Corpus: Feminism and Detective Fiction," in *Feminism in Women's Detective Fiction*, ed. Glenwood Irons (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 173- 74.
[29] Michele Barrett, "Ideology and the Cultural Production of Gender," in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*, ed. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (New York: Metheun, 1986), 73-74.

reporters, one is a radio journalist and free-lance magazine writer, three are television journalists and one is a free-lance writer for a local newsmagazine—journalism as a profession legitimizes their role as detectives in two important ways. First, it frees them from traditional expectations regarding female behavior because journalists have assumed a social responsibility to get to the bottom of stories even if they have to break through social conventions. Second, their roles as journalists allow the women to push their way into circles of power, circles that are often corrupt and ripe for investigation.

The best example of the Washington woman journalist in this genre is the *Knight & Day* series by Nessen and Neuman.[31] Consequently, it will be examined at length. In this series, Washington is a place that "turns good people bad,"[32] and an "equal-opportunity sleaze bucket. Not all officials were for sale. But most of them were for rent."[33] More importantly, however, Washington is a city filled with conflicts: "Black and white. Rich and poor. North and South. Hell, Washington, D.C., was the capital of those divisions."[34] It is also a place where the press is accorded a significant amount of power, where if "you want something done, you've got to attract the attention of the media first."[35] Washington details, such as street names, are very accurate and Washington celebrities are only thinly disguised. In a passage describing the White House Correspondents dinner, an annual D.C. ritual, Nessen and Neuman thinly veil the notable Helen Thomas as "Heddy Kirkland, the ancient wire service correspondent" who

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[30] Ibid., 80-81.
[31] The authors drew on vast Washington experience in newspapers, broadcasting and political communication in writing their mysteries.
[32] Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 256.
[33] Ibid., 15.
[34] Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 39.
[35] Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 98.

had "blazed a trail for her and other women reporters" by breaking into the all male National Press Club and Gridiron Club.[36]

In this setting, Jane Day is a career-oriented and ambitious reporter for *The Washington Post*. After growing up hearing her mother tell her not to "let a man get in the way of your career,"[37] she appears in the novels as a 30-ish reporter who is feeling conflicted over her profession and her desire for domesticity and a home. Jane had "prided herself on being an aggressive reporter," but "wondered whether she possessed a sufficient amount of the killer instinct to succeed as a reporter."[38]

In each of the three novels, Jane teams up with conservative broadcast personality Jerry Knight and D.C. homicide cop A.L. Jones to solve a prominent murder grabbing headlines in the city. Though Jane's relationship with Jerry is prickly in the beginning, by the end of the series they are committed to a relationship. Among the reasons she is attracted to him is the fact that Jerry not threatened by her career.[39] But it is Jane's career, in fact, that ultimately keeps them apart. In the final book, Jane is "bored with daily journalism."[40] Excited about the possibility of reaching a broader audience with her ideas, she takes a job offer as a scriptwriter in Hollywood (though she almost says no because of her relationship with Jerry). Jerry, who does not plan to move to Los Angeles with Jane, doesn't blame her for leaving him since she has the same kind of ambition he does.[41] The two plan to continue the relationship, visiting each other whenever possible.

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[36] Nessen and Neuman, *Press Corpse*, 18.
[37] Ibid., 186.
[38] Ibid., 74.
[39] Ibid., 14.
[40] Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 282, 283.
[41] Ibid., 284.

Jane's job at the *Post* is not easy. She works in a world of men. Her editor, the executive editor and the newspaper's lawyer are all men. Her editor fits the traditional stereotype of a drunken, cursing city editor constantly making passes at his female employees. When he isn't accidentally brushing against her breasts[42] or proposing to come to her apartment for a nightcap,[43] he insults her:

> Naturally, Scoffield zeroed in on the one weak spot in Jane's story. "I thought I told you to include police reaction!" he exploded as soon as she hit the office Monday morning. "I called but they never called back," Jane stammered. "Then you goddamn write that you couldn't reach the police, not that they had no comment. Jesus Christ, you're worse than a goddamn TV reporter."[44]

The world outside the newsroom isn't much better. Jane knows that "sometimes women reporters had to use their wiles, because male sources didn't take them seriously. To flirt, perchance to scoop."[45]

Despite her strong opinions and tolerance for the news business, Jane is portrayed as a bundle of self-doubt. She worries over her body, "scrawny everywhere except her thighs," her needle nose, and her curly orange hair.[46] Jane also represents one ideal of what career women should strive to be in order to be attractive to men. In these books it is not classic beauty, nor clothes or other commodities: it is self-examination and even self-doubt. Jane worries constantly that the flaws in her relationship with Jerry are her fault,[47] but it is this self-examination that sets Jane apart from other women. In Jerry's eyes, these imperfections are appealing. Though when he'd first met her, he felt that

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[42] Nessen and Neuman, *Press Corpse*, 33.
[43] Ibid., 54.
[44] Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 106.
[45] Nessen and Neuman, *Press Corpse*, 16.
[46] Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 15, 16.
[47] Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 15.

Jane's face had an "irritating intensity he saw in most women reporters,"[48] Jane's constant self-doubt triggers a Jerry's protective instinct. He feels Jane is "not like most of the hard-charging, ball-breaking career women he encountered in Washington. Jerry's reaction to her insecurity was to want to protect her from the cruelties and uncertainties of life."[49]

Chris Benson's heroine protagonist, Angela McKenzie, is in some ways an African American version of Jane Day, although she is far less self-conscious about her looks and her relationships with men. She has a long-time lover whom she ditches with few regrets during the course of the novel, but another, more appealing suitor soon appears on the scene. Along with a police detective, he saves her at the end from the hands of the murderer, a political consultant who has killed her best friend to keep her from exposing the consultant's corrupt relationships with the tobacco industry.

Benson, vice president of Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago, is the former Washington editor for *Ebony* magazine. He presents Angela as a middle-class woman determined to "prove something to her editors, show the White boys they didn't have a monopoly on intelligence and talent...make her mark as a star writer and to do it all before she turned 35."[50] She manages to do it by dint of being smart and extremely hard working, piecing together evidence that highlights the seamy side of Washington's power structure, in which African Americans operate at a disadvantage. Her only friend at the newspaper is another African American reporter who is out of favor with his bosses.

Unlike the protagonists in the other books, the heroine of *Death of a Garden Pest* is not a professional journalist but a suburban housewife interested in gardening who

[48] Nessen and Neuman, *Knight & Day*, 77.
[49] Nessen and Neuman, *Death with Honors*, 95.

gained fame by solving a crime in an earlier book. In this book she is asked to host a gardening show on public television that becomes the target of anti- environmentalists. Considered an amateur by her colleagues, she becomes a suspect herself when the woman she replaced on the show is murdered. For our study the book is mainly of interest because it shows the staff tensions within news organizations and jealousy among women journalists.

Hidden Agenda straddles the line between being an adventure story and a mystery. It features a naïve heroine who becomes a cable news star due to the machinations of an evil group of politicians from the Christian right who plan to run her for President. Happily married with two children, Jonelle Patterson is shocked when murders occur at news events she is covering. It is her husband who points out that these grotesque events appear to have been planned to boost her career as a television star. This unlikely story dramatizes the fact that corporate interests can manipulate women journalists. Yet, it also shows that they can outwit their foes by detecting wrongdoers and publicizing them as Jonelle eventually did.

Unlike the other books, Rawlings's mysteries do not deal with skullduggery in the nation's capital. They feature Rachel Crowne, a twice-divorced free-lance journalist, who solves murders of ordinary citizens in a suburban setting. In *The Murder Lover*, she draws strength from a visit to the Holocaust Museum in downtown Washington. Determined not to be a victim herself, she fights off a murderer who attacks young Jewish women. In *Deadly Harvest* she discovers the murderer is a most unlikely individual – an elderly woman in a wheelchair. Of all the protagonists studied, Rachel seems to be the least dependent on males, although she has sexual relationships. More

[50]Benson, *Special Interest*, 6.

interested in children than in husbands, she parts company with a man who objects to her friendship with a deprived African American child from Baltimore.

Relationship Stories

If relationships play a significant part in the murder investigations of mystery novels, the reverse also may be true. In some novels involving Washington women journalists, investigations play an important part in novels principally concerned with relationships. *The Sky Is Falling* by Sidney Sheldon, a best-selling author and scrip-writer, subtly explores gender conflicts through the pretext of investigation in an action-packed thriller.

The protagonist, Dana Evans, a former war correspondent working for a local Washington television station, begins investigating a rash of accidents that has killed off the prominent Winthrop family. Her relationships, however, form a major theme of the book. Early on, her fiancé Jeff, also a television anchor, proposes, to the delight of her adopted son Kemal, a war orphan from Sarajevo who has lost an arm. "The three of them were going to live together, vacation together, and just be together. That magic word."[51]

The prospect of this relationship is endangered first by Dana's investigation—Kemal is doped by a "nanny" to keep Dana from solving the Winthrop murders —and second by another woman. Jeff's ex-wife Rachel, diagnosed with cancer, hopes to lure him back, thus depriving Dana of Jeff's support during the investigation. Rachel's character evolves from vamp to martyred saint, however, when she finds out the cancer is fatal and conceals it from Jeff to send him back to Dana.

[51] Sheldon, *The Sky Is Falling*, 69.

In fact, other than Dana, all the other Washington women turn out to be villains. The nanny, Mrs. Delaney, drugs Kemal and plans to kidnap him,[52] a senator's wife aids in planning the kidnapping,[53] and a female co-worker helps execute those plans.[54] Dana is dependent on Jeff and her bosses to save her life. The story ends with her marriage to Jeff and the formal adoption of Kemal.

Linda Cashdan's *Special Interests* also features a Washington woman journalist investigating a major story—in this case it is the illegal use of undocumented workers to work in a makeshift factory handling hazardous chemicals. The main character, Cynthia Matthews, is a radio reporter who made a name for herself doing freelance exposés, most notably one about an ex-boyfriend. In this novel not only is Cynthia's career more important than her love life, but journalism itself is seen to exert ultimate influence in Washington, as evident in this toast to Cynthia: "To the woman who managed to have the city's biggest catch fall in love with her, but, in the end, decided journalistic integrity was more important than bagging the big one! To ultimate power!"[55]

Cynthia sees herself as two separate people: "Reporter Matthews" versus "Lover Matthews," "experienced fact finder" versus "pathetic pushover."[56] Fortunately, Cynthia doesn't quite measure up to the another type of career woman who appears in the book. This is the Capitol Hill secretary who "probably had never married because she was married to her job, married to the man she served, much the way nuns are married to

[52] Ibid., 291, 292.
[53] Ibid., 303, 304.
[54] Ibid., 301.
[55] Cashdan, *Special Interests*, 23.
[56] Ibid., 24, 25.

God, and she served him with a similar sense of mission and fulfillment. Capitol Hill was filled with such women."[57]

Much of the book revolves around finding out who the real Cynthia Matthews is—is she a tough enough journalist to run a story gained from a drunken senator grieving for his dead wife? Or a compassionate farm girl who will have the sympathy not to run it?[58] She only achieves balance in her life, and her writing, after she enters a relationship with lawyer Jed Farber. Toward the end of the book he pronounces her earlier writing to have been "a very sharp bit of reporting" and "shrewd, clever, exacting—but icy cold," in contrast to her current writing that has evolved into being "warm. Loving, even, in a way."[59] The book ends with his marriage proposal and Cynthia asking for an "old-fashioned commitment, not a new-fashioned one."[60]

In Danielle Steel's *Journey*, journalism takes a back seat to relationships. The main character, Madeline, is the star anchor of the network her husband, Jack Hunter, owns. But neither seems to be consumed by journalism like the characters in the other books. Madeline is caught by surprise when the U.S. invades Iraq. When the story first breaks—on a Friday night—instead of rushing to the newsroom, she thinks "it was going to be an important story for her too, on Monday."[61] In fact, the pair takes a two-week vacation to Europe just after the attack.[62]

This novel is principally concerned with Washington, DC as a backdrop for the psychological and physical abuse Madeline receives from her husband. As part of her

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[57] Ibid., 53.
[58] Ibid., 88.
[59] Ibid., 288.
[60] Ibid., 371.
[61] Steel, *Journey*, 61.
[62] Ibid., 92.

growing awareness of the extent of her abuse, Madeline begins to form close relationships with other females: the First Lady, a therapist, her long-lost daughter and finally a women's support group that wants to help her save herself.[63] The opportunity to serve on the First Lady's commission on violence against women serves to educate Madeline about abuse and introduces her to a man who eventually helps her to escape her marriage. Her husband's status as an advisor to the President on media issues surrounding an attack on Iraq serves as an exercise of his male power and influence.

Madeline's position as a journalist occupies a pivotal, although limited, role in the novel. First, it is evidence of Jack's influence in transforming Madeline's fate from a young victim of spousal abuse in her first marriage to a beautiful, successful anchorwoman. Second, it serves a dual purpose in that it both hinders and helps her. It keeps her married to Jack for a lengthy period (he threatens to ruin her career if she leaves). Yet, it also gives her a lifeline out of the relationship (though she doesn't believe it, others continually remind her that she will have her pick of jobs once she leaves Jack and his network).

An even more interesting transformation of a Washington woman journalist occurs in the book *Happy Endings* by Sally Quinn. This is the only book in our study that depicts a woman journalist's pregnancy. The main character, Allison Sterling, undergoes a personal transformation from career woman to human being and then to tragic heroine in the course of a pregnancy that ends with the death of her disabled baby. In the process both she and her husband, a distinguished journalist who has fathered a child by the First Lady, are unfaithful to each other as they move in Washington's highest social circles.

[63] Ibid., 253.

Early in the book, Allison is seen as a sex object. After she eagerly accepts an offer to be the first woman editor at the *Washington Daily,* she is told by the man who hired her "God, you're an easy lay."[64] When she takes the position, she desires to be seen as sexless. After hearing male editors telling an offensive joke, Allison tells her boss: "I want to be neuter ... you watch. I am going to be so sexless in this job that after a while nobody will think of me as a woman."[65] Yet, it is her pregnancy that makes her human in male eyes. Male reporters confide in her about their children and home life, seeing her as "a woman, instead of the hard-nosed ambitious automation."[66] Her pregnancy also provides her an entry into a seemingly secret female society when she is invited to a monthly mother's lunch at the paper.[67] In the later months of her pregnancy, however, she describes herself as becoming a sexless outcast:

> The bigger you got, the more invisible you got. Men in Washington, and particularly men in power, discounted a woman the minute she started to show. It was as if they expected your brain to shrink as your stomach swelled.... They would look at her face, smile in initial recognition, their eyes would instinctively travel downward, and immediately glaze over.[68]

Finally, with the death of her baby, Allison turns into a tragic heroine, "still beautiful" but "terribly pale and gaunt."[69] She is greeted with the promise of redemption at the end of the book when she reconciles with husband and suspects she may again be pregnant. Through all her travail, however, including an affair with a reporter who works under her, she continues to perform successfully as the top woman on her newspaper.

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[64] Ibid., 83.
[65] Ibid., 130.
[66] Ibid., 271.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 329, 330.
[69] Ibid., 502.

The Ultimatum by T. Davis Bunn presents the commercial news media as crass, self-absorbed and ego-driven during a depression that wipes out the U.S. economy. When the striking mixed-race protagonist, Linda Kee, a former CBS television star, becomes a spokesperson for a Christian crusade to reform the nation's political structure, network bosses attempt to hire her back to silence her. After that fails, they try to smear her by quoting ex-boyfriends who called her "ambitious and grasping and calculating and manipulative."[70] At first fearful that this will disrupt her growing relationship with a widowed minister, Linda is reassured that the Christian faith embraces all those who sincerely repent.

Conclusion

After studying these novels, it's difficult not to assume that women have made progress in Washington journalism in the late twentieth century, at least as far as writers of fiction offer a realistic portrayal of their situation. In all of the novels reviewed, the protagonists are planning to keep on with their careers, regardless of whether they have found a satisfying relationship with a man. The women who are eager to have children are finding ways to do so, adopting like Dana in *The Sky Is Falling*, serving as a mentor like Rachel in *Deadly Harvest,* getting pregnant like Allison in *Happy Endings* or becoming a stepmother by marrying a divorced man with children like Cynthia in *Special Interests*. None of the heroines appear to be desperately seeking a man to fulfill their lives. In fact, Cynthia is described by her fiancé as a better journalist because of their newfound love.

[70] Bunn, *The Ultimatum*, 255.

Yet, most of the women, with the possible exception of Rachel, find it difficult to balance conflicting demands in their lives. Their investigative prowess as journalists, as well as detectives, can be demonstrated only by temporarily relinquishing women's traditional roles while they pursue stories and track down wrong-doers. This brings them considerable anxiety and may lead them into actual danger. For example, in *The Sky Is Falling*, Dana's need to find a caretaker for her adopted son, Kemal, makes her an easier target than she would have been otherwise for a sinister gang of murderers.

In many ways the novels depict women having a more difficult time proving themselves than men in the male-dominated field of journalism. Jane in *Knight and Day*, for example, flubs her first story and is distrusted by her editors. Angela in *Special Interest* is nearly fired by her white editors and treated with more suspicion than white male reporters. Cynthia in *Special Interests* is lectured for a radio spot news item that her unscrupulous boss does not like.

In addition, especially in the case of broadcasters who are uniformly described as extremely attractive, the women seem to get ahead on the basis of looks as well as ability. Jonelle in *Hidden Agenda* has no clue that she has moved up rapidly in broadcasting because she is a good "front" for a dangerous ultra-right group. Madeleine in *Journey* is a Cinderella-like creation of her domineering husband who displays her on his network. One is left with the conclusion that changing media technology, with broadcasting supplanting print as the most common medium of information, has exploited women for their sex appeal rather than served to reward them for intelligence.

Even Allison, the woman editor at a thinly disguised version of *The Washington Post* in *Happy Endings,* appears to have benefited from her sex appeal in gaining the

attention of her editors. The least successful woman professionally, Rachel, also is described as the least good looking. It is worthy of note that Jane Day, the *Washington Post* reporter who worries about her appearance and weight, ends up leaving the newspaper to pursue a career as a screenwriter.

In terms of the sex of the author, we found that the most multi-dimensional portrait of a woman journalist, Jane Day, was created by the male and female writing team of Nessen and Neuman, who were married at the time they wrote their novels. Also, multi-faceted characters were created by African-American author Benson and two female writers, Ripley and Rawlings. Yet, the most stereotypical character in terms of a woman being seen as a helpless victim was Madeline, created by female author Danielle Steel. Thus, we could make no generalization about the sex of the author influencing a realistic portrayal of women.

The Washington locale highlights the relationship of women to the political system while portraying them as outsiders, just as women seem to be outsiders in their own news organizations. The political climate of Washington gives women journalists plenty to investigate, while highlighting the differences in lifestyle between powerful politicians and their influential backers and the unfortunate homeless frequently seen on streets near the capitol.

Interestingly, at least three of the protagonists—Jane Day, Cynthia Matthews and Angela McKenzie—live in Adams Morgan, a mixed racial and economic area now being gentrified. They symbolize reporters who straddle the two worlds of the powered and the unempowered residents of Washington. In general, the women pictured in the novels are middle class and upwardly mobile in their profession, their living standards and their love

lives. The main exception is Allison Sterling of *Happy Endings,* who represents old money and highly placed contacts.

The representations of these women are not wholly flattering. Sometimes they are depicted without compassion toward their sources, coworkers and the general public in their eagerness to advance themselves. It is true, as Steve Hallock noted in a *Quill* article, that the characters in journalistic novels "are a sex-hungry, scandal loving lot, and many of the situations are too fantastic to be believable."[71] Still, it is possible that the portrayals of these women contain truths about the present situation of women in journalism that are not altogether comforting. The women want to succeed in a male-oriented workplace dominated by the male world of Washington politics. They are eager to expose corruption to advance their careers, but with the exception of Linda Kee in *The Ultimatum,* are not seeking ways to change the system of corruption. While these novels show that Washington journalism isn't necessarily a hospitable field for women, they also demonstrate that it provides opportunities for women to match wits with males and to succeed.

This limited study points to the value of examining the depiction of women journalists in popular culture as a way of describing their status and assessing the meanings of their roles in society. It is in line with recent scholarly interest in the fictional depictions of journalists.[72] Whether or not they are reflective of real life, these fictional images are worthy of study because they show how authors are presenting

[71] Steve Hallock. "Fiction or Truth." *Quill.* May, 1997, p. 34.
[72] A notable example of this interest is the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, a project of the Norman Lear Center of the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication. This project not only includes a periodic journal and online essays and resources, but an extensive database cataloguing over 22,500 cultural artifacts (such as radio programs, comic books, cartoons, short stories and novels) that feature journalists.

women's roles in Washington journalism to a mass market audience that is likely to be chiefly women. We can assume that that these fictional portrayals therefore may be a factor in shaping public perceptions of the role of Washington women journalists in society, particularly among other women.

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ESIG

Television viewing and attitude toward marriage:

Does program genre make a difference?

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Television viewing and attitude toward marriage:

Does program genre make a difference?

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between attitude toward marriage and television program genres. Statistical analysis found no relationship between nine program genres and attitude toward marriage and no relationship between nine demographic variables and attitude toward marriage. However, post hoc analyses found that as sitcom viewing increases, attitude toward marriage decreases, and that children of married or widowed parents were more positive about marriage than children of divorced or never-married parents.

Television viewing and attitude toward marriage:

Does program genre make a difference?

Television is imbedded in the fabric of American society, permeating our mornings, afternoons and nights. Given the pervasive nature of television, many scholars over the years have researched its cultivating effects to determine if television is responsible for shaping the way in which individuals view the world (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Volgy & Schwarz, 1980; Morgan, 1986; Dominick, 1990; Rimer & Rosengren, 1990; Dietz & Strasburger, 1991; Potter, 1991; Signorielli, 1991). This study will examine one area where television could play an important role in shaping attitudes: marriage. Every day on television, images of marriage and family, dating and mating, hooking up and breaking up fill the screen. The purpose of this research is to use the cultivation hypothesis to examine whether the genres of television programs viewed have any relationship with a viewer's attitude toward marriage. In addition, this study will examine demographic variables to determine if they have an influence on attitude toward marriage.

Marriage and Divorce in the United States

Although this study examines the effects of television viewing on attitude toward marriage, the status of the institution of marriage in America is also an important component in this equation. Divorce is entrenched in the American way of life, although this was not always the case. The incidence of divorce has increased over the decades. In the 1920s, the rate of divorce was less than 2 per 1,000 people in the population, while in 1998 there were 4.1 divorces for every 1,000 Americans (Vital Statistics, 2002). The 2000 U.S. Census found that 54.4% of U.S. citizens were married and 9.7% were

divorced, with an additional 2.2% who were separated (Profile of Selected Social Characteristics, 2000). These figures do not amount to the 50% divorce rate that seems imbedded in the national consciousness. Peck (1993) claims that this common misperception can be blamed on religious leaders, academics, and the mass media, who either misread statistics or inflate the perceived divorce rate in an effort to link divorce with what they see as the breakdown of the American family structure.

During the first half of the 20th century, divorce began to creep into the mainstream of society. Indeed, by the 1940s, etiquette maven Emily Post was addressing divorce in her publications. The late 1950s brought a shift in priorities for Americans as some husbands and wives began considering the happiness of their families less and their own personal satisfaction more. Thus, husbands and wives began evaluating family bonds to see how they fulfilled their needs as individuals. In this new divorce culture, Americans felt entitled to a divorce as a means of improving their lives, leading to a greater incidence of divorce (Whitehead, 1998).

While the importance of maintaining a marriage has changed for some Americans, beliefs about ideal family structures have evolved as well. Support for the traditional "father works, mother stays home" type of family has eroded over the years. In a study on the changing perceptions of marriage and family, Jacques (1998) found that agreement decreased significantly between 1977 and 1994 for statements such as "A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works" and "It is more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself."

Whitehead (1998) argued that these changing attitudes in America have led to men and women making marriage vows for "as long as we both shall like" rather than "as

long as we both shall live" (pg. 142). In other words, marriage is no longer viewed as a permanent fixture in a person's life, but one that lasts as long as both parties are satisfied with the arrangement. The advent of no-fault divorce laws, which allow a person to end a marriage for any reason, furthered this more casual approach to matrimony.

Some researchers argue that these changing attitudes and family structures have an effect on the people who grow up with them. Christensen and Brooks (2001) reviewed the literature on the effects of parental divorce on children when they are grown. They found that many adult children of divorce have problems with intimate relationships and marriage, although a host of factors beyond their parents' divorce play into the likelihood that they will have difficulties with love and intimacy in their own lives. These other considerations include the individual's gender, age, sexual behavior, and emotional neediness, as well as the length of time since their parents divorced and the amount of conflict the family experienced, both before the divorce and after. In addition, Christensen and Brooks reported that adult children of divorce are frequently inclined to live with their partners rather than marry them, and to automatically consider divorce as an option if the marriage does not work out.

Television and Cultivation

These changing attitudes about divorce and non-traditional family structures have been reflected in the programs seen on television. Pitta (1999) performed a broad analysis of the way televised entertainment programs have depicted family, marriage, and divorce over the decades and found major changes in the television landscape during a 50-year span. Divorce was not a part of any television shows in the 1950s. Two-parent families were the norm, although widowers were featured in programs such as "The Andy Griffith

Show." Divorced families made their first appearances on television in the 1970s and became commonplace on TV shows in the 1980s, in "Who's the Boss," "The Golden Girls," and others.

Television in the 1980s and 1990s showed imperfect marriages and families, which were a stark contrast to those depicted on 1950s programs such as "The Donna Reed Show" or "Leave it to Beaver," where the men worked, the women stayed home and the children were always well behaved. Shows such as "The Simpsons," "The Cosby Show," and "Married with Children" featured two-parent families grappling with conflict, neuroses, and everyday problems. Other shows, such as "Ally McBeal" or "Murphy Brown," featured single, working women with successful careers but many failed relationships. Homosexuality, single parents, dual-career couples, and blended families have also become common in today's television offerings (Pitta, 1999). Clearly, the days when Ward, June, and the Beaver entertained America are gone. The question that remains is what effects these new shows have on viewers.

George Gerbner (1976) was one of the earliest researchers to become concerned about the impact television has on those who watch it, and he proposed the cultivation theory of television viewing to account for this impact. Simply put, cultivation theory states that exposure to television will cultivate beliefs about the real world that are more similar to what is shown on television than what exists in reality. In other words, heavy television viewers tend to internalize the values and beliefs they see on television, believing that what they see on TV mirrors reality, when this may not actually be the case.

In one of the landmark cultivation studies, Gerbner and Gross (1976) found that heavy television viewers often answered questions about the real world with the "television answer," or the answer that hews closest to what is depicted on TV. Specifically, heavy television viewers tended to be less trusting and more afraid of violence, while light television viewers perceived the world as less frightening, violent, and dangerous. Gerbner claimed this "mean world view" was an example of the cultivating effect of television toward violence.

Although Gerbner's focus was on televised violence, cultivation research has touched on a variety of political and social topics, including beliefs about sexuality (Dominick, 1990), affluence (Potter, 1991), traditional sex roles (Volgy & Schwarz, 1980), materialism (Reimer and Rosengren, 1990), attitudes toward racism, marijuana use, and sexism (Morgan, 1986), and attitudes toward marriage (Signorielli, 1991). Much of the research has focused on the effects on children (Dietz & Strasburger, 1991), but this study's focus is on older viewers and whether they believe the onscreen depictions of marriage and divorce resemble what actually happens in U.S. homes.

Many cultivation researchers try to understand the "television world" through content analyses of television programs in order to determine what cultivating effects they might expect to see in those who watch. A number of content analyses offer insights into the way marriage, divorce, and the related topics of family and sexuality are portrayed on television, which can aid in determining what to look for among television viewers.

Among the findings in a study of the sexual content of 19 television series popular with teenagers in 1985 was that unmarried sexual intercourse was depicted five times

more frequently than married sexual intercourse, and one in five of the participants in those unmarried sexual acts was cheating on a spouse (Greenberg, Stanley, Siemicki, Heeter, Soderman, & Linsangan, 1993). The attractiveness of unmarried sex to teenagers was shown in a study of adolescents' responses to televised sexual acts. Scenes of unmarried intercourse were rated the sexiest and the most realistic when compared to heavy kissing, homosexuality, married sex, prostitution, and rape. Least enjoyable and least sexy, according to the adolescents, were the scenes of married sex (Greenberg, Linsangan, & Soderman, 1993). The perceived unsavory nature of married sex could influence viewers' attitudes toward marriage if the cultivation hypothesis is to be believed.

Among the findings in Olson's (1994) study of soap opera-watching college students was that heavy viewers tended to perceive higher actual adultery rates than did non-viewers, which indicates that some television viewers have a distorted idea about marriage in the U.S. However, the same study found no difference between attitudes about premarital sex and risky sexual behavior among viewers and non-viewers. Olson concluded that the study offered mixed support overall for the cultivation hypothesis. A study of Brazilian television watchers found that when asked if marriage is important, heavy television viewers were less likely to agree (Kottak, 1990).

Signorielli (1991) conducted a content analysis followed by a cultivation analysis on the topic of marriage. She compared the presentation of marriage on drama, comedy, and action shows from 1975 to 1985. She found that shows focusing on home, marriage, and family increased during that 10-year period, such that 85 percent of primetime programs included that theme and half of the shows made it a major part of the plot.

However, the analysis found that not even one in five major characters on dramatic shows was married. In situation comedies, four out of 10 women were single and another four out of 10 were married or used to be married. The rest could not be classified. The results were similar for men in comedies; 40 percent were single, while 33 percent were married, divorced, or widowed. Like sitcom women, the rest of the men could not be classified by marital status. Overall, both lead characters and minor characters on all types of programs were more likely to be single than married.

Other findings of the study were that married characters were more likely to be considered morally good but not successful in their jobs, and were less likely to be violent. Married characters were therefore more likely to appear on sitcoms and dramas, which feature little violence and aggression, while single characters were more likely to appear on violent action shows. With these conflicting portrayals in mind, Signorielli (1991) conducted a survey among high school student to examine attitudes toward marriage and hypothesized that she would find conflicting results: Teenagers would say they planned to get married in the future, but that they would have negative attitudes toward marriage and intimacy. She found a positive correlation between television viewing and ambivalence toward marriage as a way of life. On one hand, high school students who watched a significant amount of television were more likely to want to get married, stay married, and have children, while the same segment of students said they did not see many happy marriages and did not know if it was a realistic way of life.

A more recent content analysis of the way in which marriage was presented on the most popular primetime television shows in 2002 found that television dramas offered a more positive image of marriage than did sitcoms. Analysis of the data suggested two

reasons for this finding. First, the majority of married and single characters appeared on dramas, while the majority of divorced characters appeared on sitcoms. The study found that married characters and, to a lesser degree, single characters were more likely to make positive statements about marriage. Therefore, because married and single characters appeared more frequently on dramas, this program genre was more likely to contain positive statements about marriage. Likewise, the study found that divorced characters were more likely to make negative statements about marriage. Because divorced characters appeared more often on sitcoms, this type of program was more likely to depict negative marital attitudes (Netzley, 2002).

Another possible reason for the differences in marital attitudes presented on dramas and sitcoms are the settings of the two program types. Sitcoms generally focus on the themes of home and family and are therefore more likely to show both the good and bad aspects of marriage. Dramas, on the other hand, generally spend very little time dealing with characters' personal lives, which leaves fewer opportunities for a balanced depiction of home life (Netzley, 2002).

Measuring Media Use

In order for this study to examine the relationship between attitude toward marriage and television viewing, some measure of television exposure had to be employed. Over the years, researchers have struggled to find the best method to measure television viewing. Gerbner and his colleagues (1976, 1979, 1980) used a relatively simple measurement technique by dividing participants into two groups: heavy viewers, who watched an average of four or more hours of television daily, and light viewers, who watched less than four hours daily. Some researchers have followed this method of

measurement, asking respondents to indicate how many hours of television they watch on an average weekday and how often they watch television, from "never" to "almost every day" (Signorielli, 1991).

A study by Hawkins and Pingree (1981) found that not every program on television has the same cultivating effects and, as such, they rejected measurement methods that implied that television programs, regardless of genre, offer uniform messages. In light of these findings, researchers began to utilize more refined measures of media exposure. Some researchers asked respondents to use a list of television programs to indicate those they watched regularly (Elliott & Slater, 1980), while others provided a list of shows but were only interested in those that the respondents had watched in the last week (Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986). Reeves (1978) gave participants a list of programs and asked them to indicate the frequency with which they watched shows, ranging from "every week" to "never."

Potter and Chang (1990) provide what is perhaps the best solution to the problem of measuring television use in cultivation research. The researchers tested five different measurements of television exposure to see if any one best predicted cultivation effects for adolescents. They collected data on total hours of television exposure and total hours of viewing in each of 12 different program types: action-adventure, cartoons, daytime and primetime soap operas, game shows, news, sitcoms, sports, talk shows, televised movies, televised music, and other.

Using that information, Potter and Chang (1990) were able to calculate five measures of television exposure: total television exposure, television exposure by program type, television exposure by program types while controlling for total television

use, proportional exposure to different program types, and weighted proportional exposure to different program types. They then measured participants' beliefs and estimates about television and the real world, looking for "television answers" to the questions.

The researchers found that total television exposure was the least successful predictor of cultivation effects, followed by the weighted proportion measurement. The remaining three – amount of program type viewed, program type controlled by total viewing, and proportional viewing – produced significantly better results. The differences between the three methods were so slight that no one measure emerged as the best predictor. In the end, the researchers concluded that the type of programs viewed has a stronger relationship to cultivation than does the total amount of television viewed. Because of Potter and Chang's (1990) findings, this study will collect information about participants' total television viewing and their television viewing in certain program genres with some modifications in the program categories in order to reflect both the research hypotheses and today's American television landscape.

Purpose of the Study

Based on the cultivation research that has been done over the past three decades, it would seem that what appears on television does have some influence on those who watch it. Because marriage and family are such dominant themes on television today, their cultivating effects on the public could be great. This study will examine whether a person's attitude toward marriage is related to the amount of television he or she views, and whether the types of television programs viewed are related to attitude toward marriage in different ways. This study will also look at demographic variables such as

age, race, gender, and marital status to determine if these or other variables influence attitude toward marriage.

Hypothesis

A recent content analysis has found that sitcoms are generally more negative about marriage than dramas (Netzley, 2002). In order to determine if a cultivation effect is present among heavy viewers of these two program genres, this study tests the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 1: Heavy viewers of sitcoms will have a more negative attitude toward marriage than will heavy viewers of dramas.

Research Questions

Research conducted by Hawkins and Pingree (1981) and Potter and Chang (1990) indicate that different television program genres offer different content and therefore have different cultivating effects on the public. In addition, a person's demographic characteristics can play an important role in shaping his or her beliefs and attitudes. Parental marital status, particularly, is key in shaping an individual's perceptions about marriage (Christensen & Brooks, 2001). Because of these facts, this study attempts to answer the following questions.

Research Question 1: What relationships do different television program genres have with attitude toward marriage?

Research Question 2: Do perceived television credibility, perceived divorce rate, and demographic variables such as age, race, gender, education, and marital status of self and parents influence attitude toward marriage?

Method

This study was a cross-sectional survey using a 45-item online questionnaire to collect data. The questionnaire gathered information on the respondents' age, race, gender, education, and annual income, as well as their marital status and their parents' marital status. The questionnaire asked participants to report how many total hours of television they watch each week and how many hours weekly they watch in nine program genres, adapted from Potter and Chang's (1990) research: sitcoms, primetime dramas, daytime soap operas, news (network and 24-hour news channels), reality television, talk shows (daytime and late night), sports, music on television, and other (cartoons, game shows, movies on television, etc.) In the statistical analyses, proportional exposure to each program type was used to examine the relationship between show genre and attitude toward marriage. Proportional viewing was calculated by dividing the weekly hours viewed in each program type by the total hours of weekly viewing.

The questionnaire measured the respondents' attitudes toward marriage with 23 statements that were a combination of questions created for the survey and preexisting scale items taken verbatim from the source or slightly modified. Six items came from Signorielli's (1991) study.[1] They were altered to fit this study's purpose and to be answered with a five-point Likert scale. Signorielli reported a Cronbach's alpha of .676 on the original scale, which included two additional questions that were not used because they did not fit the research purpose. Four questionnaire items were taken from Greenberg and Woods' (1999) scale to study uses and gratifications of soap operas. Two items from the questionnaire were taken verbatim, and two other statements were slightly altered to reflect the purpose of the research project. The remaining six items from the

original survey were omitted because they dealt with sex rather than marriage. Greenberg and Woods did not report a reliability alpha, as their scale was a suggestion for future research and was not actually administered. The rest of the statements to measure attitude toward marriage were based upon literature written about divorce, marriage, and the mass media. Respondents' overall attitudes toward marriage were gauged by taking the mean of their answers to the 23 items.

Four other questionnaire items were designed to measure how credible respondents feel television programming is. Although much of the credibility research that is conducted focuses on how credible the public feels different sources of news are (Johnson & Kaye, 2002; Johnson & Kaye, 1998), applying a measure of credibility to the question at hand could indicate whether an individual's perception of the credibility of entertainment programming makes him or her more likely to demonstrate cultivation effects. The questions were formed based on readings of the literature on that topic (Monaco, 1998; Gaziano, 1988; Kottak, 1990). Participants' attitude toward television's credibility was measured by finding the mean for those four questions.[2] Finally, a questionnaire item asked the respondents what the divorce rate in the United States is to see if heavy television viewers tend to overestimate or underestimate the number when compared to lighter viewers.

When Cronbach's alpha was run on the questionnaire items, the four statements on television credibility had a reliability of -.6999, while the 23-item assessment of attitude toward marriage had a reliability of .5844. Due to the low reliability on the attitude toward marriage scale, the researcher examined the reliability analysis to determine the alpha of the scale if each individual item were deleted. Items showing

potential for the most improvement of the scale's reliability were eliminated one at a time, and the reliability analysis was repeated until the alpha was predicted to decrease rather than increase if any further items were eliminated. In all, nine statements were removed, and the remaining 14 items showed a reliability of .8452. These 14 items were used to calculate participants' mean attitude toward marriage for use in the statistical analyses.[3]

To select participants for the study, 25 states were randomly chosen, and e-mail addresses were generated from each state using Yahoo People Search. A total of 1,969 addresses were collected and e-mail messages were sent asking the recipients to complete the online survey. However, about 1,500 messages were returned as undeliverable due to bad addresses. Of the approximately 400 people who received e-mail messages, 20 completed the survey, leading to a response rate of 5%. This is on the low end of reported response rates for e-mail-generated survey responses, which vary widely: 7% (Tse, 1998), 24% (Paolo, Bonaminio, Gioson, Patridge & Kallail, 2000), 40% (Mehta & Sivadas, 1995), 51% (Truell, Bartlett & Alexander, 2002), and 70% (Sproull, 1986), for example.

In order to generate a sufficient sample size to analyze the results, the author sent an e-mail message to 60 people in her e-mail address book, asking them to fill out the survey and to pass the message on to everyone in their address books, and so forth. This "snowballing" technique netted an additional 172 responses. Although this technique is not ideal as it eliminates the element of randomness and takes the control over who receives the e-mail message out of the hands of the researcher, it was the only available

method to increase the sample size. The total number of people who received the forwarded message is unknown; as such, a response rate cannot be calculated.

To answer Hypothesis 1, a T-Test was used to compare the mean attitude toward marriage among heavy sitcoms viewers with the mean attitude toward marriage among heavy viewers of dramas. Heavy viewers were defined as those whose proportional viewing was .30 or higher. This cut-off point was selected because a frequency distribution of proportional viewing of sitcoms and dramas showed that .30 and higher accounted for 25% percent of respondents in both program genres.

For Research Questions 1 and 2, regression analysis was used. For Research Question 1, the respondents' mean attitude toward marriage was the dependent variable and independent variables were the proportional amount of sitcoms, dramas, soap operas, news, reality television, talk shows, sports, televised music, and other shows viewed. For Research Question 2, the mean attitude toward marriage was again the dependent variable and the independent variables were the mean television credibility scores, estimated divorce rate, age, race, gender, education, and marital status of self and parents. The three categorical variables used in this statistical analysis were collapsed into dichotomous variables for use in the multiple regression. Ethnicity was divided into Caucasian and Other, while marital status of self and parents was divided into Married, which included married and widowed individuals, and Unmarried, which included never married, divorced, and separated individuals.

Results

In all, 192 survey responses were collected, and two questionnaires were discarded due to numerous missing responses. The mean age of respondents was 37.2.

The youngest respondents were 18 and the oldest was 82. Of the respondents, 62.1% percent were women, 44.7% were married, and 44.7% were single. The average amount of television viewed each week was 12.7 hours. Other descriptive statistics of the sample are listed in Table 1.

Hypothesis 1: The results of a T-Test run on the data were not significant (T=-1.447, p=.154), as is shown in Table 2. Due to this finding, the hypothesis is rejected. The mean attitude toward marriage among heavy sitcom viewers does not differ significantly from the mean attitude toward marriage among heavy viewers of dramas. However, heavy sitcom viewers had a mean attitude toward marriage that was slightly more positive than heavy drama viewers. Further tests to utilize the data at hand also proved to be non-significant, with there being no significant difference between the mean attitude toward marriage of all survey participants and heavy drama viewers (T=-.245, p=.807, Table 3a) and between the mean attitude toward marriage of all survey participants and heavy sitcom viewers (T=1.262, p=.213, Table 3b). Likewise, the mean attitude toward marriage among heavy viewers of sitcoms was not significantly different from the mean attitude toward marriage among light sitcom viewers (T=1.564, p=.122, Table 4a). The same non-significant results were true among heavy and light viewers of dramas (T=-.195, p=.846, Table 4b).

Research Question 1: The results of the multiple regression run on the data were not significant (F=1.150, p=.332), as is shown in Table 5. The proportional viewing of specific television program genres had no significant relationship with attitude toward marriage. However, proportional sitcom viewing did approach significance (p=.056). As a result, a multiple regression was run post hoc with proportional sitcom viewing as the

only independent variable. The results were significant (F=4.092, p=.045, Table 6), and it showed a beta of -.146. This indicates that an inverse relationship exists between attitude toward marriage and sitcom viewing. In other words, as sitcom viewing increased, a favorable attitude toward marriage decreased. No other variables in the initial multiple regression approached significance, and four of them – dramas, reality shows, talk shows, and other shows – showed negative betas, indicating an inverse relationship between viewing and attitude toward marriage.

Research Question 2: The results from the multiple regression run on the data were not significant (F=.866, p=.557), as is shown in Table 7. Although the overall regression equation was not significant, one demographic variable, parents' marital status, was significant (p=.026). Because of this, a post hoc T-Test was conducted to compare the mean attitude of marriage among participants whose parents were in the Married category and whose parents were in the Unmarried category. The test was significant (T=-2.080, p=.041, Table 8), with participants whose parents were married or widowed having a more favorable attitude toward marriage than those whose parents were divorced, separated, or never married. Again, none of the other variables approached significance, but negative betas appeared for age, ethnicity, participants' own marital status, the estimated divorce rate, and the perceived credibility of television.

Discussion

This study set out to examine if television viewing had any cultivating effects on viewers' attitudes toward marriage. The finding that is most germane is that an increase in the proportion of sitcoms viewed is related to a decrease in favorable attitudes toward marriage. This result reflects Netzley's (2002) findings that the most popular primetime

sitcoms tend to be more negative toward marriage than do primetime dramas, which offers a glimmer of support for the cultivation hypothesis. However, there was no significant difference between the attitudes toward marriage of heavy and light sitcom viewers. This might indicate that sitcoms viewers do not need to move from light to heavy viewing in order to see a difference in attitude toward marriage. Instead, viewers may need to simply move from no sitcom viewing to any sitcom viewing at all for a change to be seen. That no other program genre was related to attitude toward marriage is also worth noting, for a cursory examination of dramas, soap operas, and reality and talk shows indicates that marriage is certainly one of the themes addressed. However, these messages were not shown to have any relationship with participants' attitudes toward marriage.

The results of the T-Test indicating that respondents whose parents were married had a more favorable attitude toward marriage than those whose parents were not married is interesting, although it is not overly surprising. Christensen and Brooks (2001) reported on the effects of divorce on children as they grow up, including the difficulties adult children of divorce face in their own relationships. Therefore, it is reasonable to accept that children of divorced or unmarried parents would have less favorable attitudes about marriage than individuals whose parents remained married.

One trend worth noting is how neutral most of the attitude toward marriage scores are. Table 2, Table 3, Table 4, and Table 8 all show mean attitudes toward marriage between a low of 3.054 and a high of 3.6805. On a five-point scale, a score of three indicates a neutral response. It would seem that the participants in this study have attitudes toward marriage that range from neutral to slightly positive. Whitehead's (1998)

belief about some Americans now viewing marriage as an impermanent institution might account for these mediocre attitude scores.

Limitations and Contributions

The most obvious limitation to this study is its nonrandom sample. Although the researcher's original intent was to gather data from individuals via randomly selected e-mail addresses, this method was not an option when most of the addresses selected were defunct. The snowballing method yielded a sufficient sample size but it eliminated the element of randomness, and it made it impossible to calculate a response rate, as the researcher lost control over who received the e-mail soliciting participants for the survey once she sent it to the first round of people. A more controlled and random method of dissemination would have been preferable.

Another flaw in this study is the 23-item scale used to measure attitude toward marriage. Its initial Cronbach's alpha of.5844 was quite low, and nine statements had to be removed before it reached the more acceptable reliability of .8452. This difficulty was somewhat surprising because an earlier pretest of the attitude toward marriage scale conducted by the author among undergraduate students at Southern Illinois University Carbondale yielded a reliability of .837 with all 23 items. Perhaps it would be productive to administer the survey again to see if the shorter scale is, indeed, more reliable.

This study's greatest contribution is the post hoc finding indicating that viewers who watch proportionately more sitcoms tend to have more negative attitudes toward marriage. This finding lends support for the cultivation hypothesis in light of the research conducted on television programs that indicate they show marriage negatively in general (Pitta, 1999; Greenberg, Linsangan & Soderman, 1993; Signorielli, 1991) and on sitcoms

specifically (Netzley, 2002). Statistical analyses did not offer support for the belief that heavy viewers of sitcoms are significantly different in their attitudes toward marriage than either light viewers, the average respondent, or heavy viewers of drama programs. These results could be interpreted to mean that it makes little difference the amount a person watches in this program genre, but that simply watching sitcoms is enough to influence attitudes. On the other hand, the researcher may have chosen an improper cut point for heavy viewers; perhaps a different definition of heavy sitcom viewers would have yielded different results.

These findings suggest avenues for further study. The neutral slant of the attitude toward marriage scores recorded suggests the need for future research into marriage's place in society. Do people feel indifferent toward the practice? If so, why is this the case? That sitcom viewers tended to be more negative about marriage is an interesting finding, and one that encourages further study of the content of primetime network sitcoms. What messages are these programs sending about marriage? Are messages being sent via jokes, dialogue, settings, or characters' marital status? Another possible study could compare the content of sitcoms with the content offered in the other program genres. How are programs such as dramas, reality shows, game shows, soap operas, and so forth different in the ways in which they present marriage? Finally, further inquiries into the cultivating effects sitcoms and other program genres have on viewers' attitudes toward marriage will help to understand further the type of impact television has on those who tune in.

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[1] Signorielli used two of the five forms of the 1985 Monitoring the Future Survey, conducted by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. She retrieved the scale items from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

[2] The following statements comprised the television credibility components of the survey:

Television does not mirror society's problems.
Many television programs closely resemble reality.
The mass media are out of touch with the average person.
Entertaining TV programs also convey accurate information about society.

[3] The following 14 statements generated the best reliability and were used in the subsequent statistical analyses:

Marital relationships are rocky.
You can't count on someone to be faithful throughout marriage.
Sex is more fun before you get married.
Marriages don't last anyhow.
I don't think I will stay married to the same person for life.
I don't see many happy marriages.
Having an intimate relationship with only one partner within a marriage is too restrictive.
Divorce is always an option if things don't work out.
I question marriage as a way of life.
At best, we can expect a man and woman to stay married for five to ten years.
Children don't have to be born within wedlock.
Furthering my career is more important than working on my marriage.
Two people who love each other don't necessarily have to get married in today's society.
Single people have more fun.

The following nine statements decreased reliability and were eliminated from the attitude toward marriage calculations:

I would prefer to have a spouse for most of my life.
I plan to get married in the future.
Most marriage I see are good.
You should only get married if you're sure you want to be with that person for the rest of your life.
Kids need an intact family when growing up.
A real family is made up of two parents and children.
America's culture of divorce has led to weaker family bonds.
Fear of commitment may keep people from getting married.
If a marriage is struggling, the spouses should seek marriage counseling.

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Table 1

Distribution of respondents by demographic and media use variables

	N	(%)
Gender		
Male	72	(37.9)
Female	118	(62.1)
Race		
African-American	2	(1.1)
Caucasian	162	(85.3)
Hispanic	3	(1.6)
Native American	3	(1.6)
Other	15	(7.9)
No response	5	(2.6)
Respondents' marital status		
Married	85	(44.7)
Divorced	13	(6.8)
Separated	1	(.5)
Never married	85	(44.7)
Widowed	2	(1.1)
No response	4	(2.1)
Parents' marital status		
Married	111	(58.4)
Divorced	40	(21.1)
Separated	2	(1.1)
Never married	2	(1.1)
Widowed	29	(15.3)
No response	6	(3.2)
Highest educational level		
Some high school	1	(.5)
High school	8	(4.2)
Some college	62	(32.6)
Bachelor's degree	64	(33.7)
Some graduate school	23	(12.1)
Master's degree	25	(13.2)
Ph.D.	5	(2.6)
No response	2	(1.1)

Table 1: Continued

Mean age (years)	37.2
Mean income	$31,000-$45,000
Mean weekly television viewing (hours)	12.7
Mean attitude toward marriage (5-point scale. Higher values = more positive)	3.08
Mean attitude toward TV credibility (5-point scale. Higher values = more credible)	3.03
Mean estimated divorce rate	47.7%
Mean weekly sitcom viewing (hours)	2.2
Mean weekly primetime drama viewing (hours)	2.4
Mean weekly soap opera viewing (hours)	.22
Mean weekly news viewing (hours)	3.33
Mean weekly reality show viewing (hours)	.48
Mean weekly talk show viewing (hours)	.57
Mean weekly sports viewing (hours)	1.3
Mean weekly televised music viewing (hours)	.47
Mean weekly viewing of other shows (hours)	1.8

Table 2

Mean Attitude Toward Marriage of Heavy Sitcom Viewers by Heavy Drama Viewers*

	Heavy Sitcom	Heavy Drama
Mean attitude toward marriage T=-1.447, p=.154	3.319	3.068

*Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude.

Table 3a

Mean Attitude Toward Marriage of all Participants by Heavy Drama Viewers*

	All Participants	Heavy Drama
Mean attitude toward marriage T=-.245, p=.807	3.08	3.068

*Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude.

Table 3b

Mean Attitude Toward Marriage of all Participants by Heavy Sitcom Viewers*

	All Participants	Heavy Sitcom
Mean attitude toward marriage T=1.262, p=.213	3.08	3.139

*Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude.

Table 4a

Mean Attitude Toward Marriage of Light Sitcom Viewers by Heavy Sitcom Viewers*

	Light Sitcom	Heavy Sitcom
Mean attitude toward marriage T=1.564, p=.122	3.054	3.139

*Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude.

Table 4b

Mean Attitude Toward Marriage of Light Drama Viewers by Heavy Drama Viewers*

	Light Drama	Heavy Drama
Mean attitude toward marriage T=-.195, p=.846	3.079	3.068

*Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude.

Table 5

Standard Multiple Regression of Proportional Viewing of Sitcoms, Dramas, Soap Operas, News, Reality Shows, Talk Shows, Sports, Televised Music and Other Programs on Attitude Toward Marriage*

Multiple R:	.220
R square:	.048
Standard Error:	.5923
F value:	1.150, p=.332

	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square
Regression	8	3.228	.404
Residual	181	63.505	.351

Regression	b	SE b	Beta	T	Sig T
Sitcoms	-.451	.234	-.156	-1.925	.056
Dramas	-.04	.280	-.016	-.178	.859
Soap operas	.693	.560	.092	1.237	.218
Reality shows	-.214	.624	-.026	-.343	.732
Talk shows	-.04	.632	-.005	-.065	.948
Sports	.168	.347	.040	.484	.629
Televised music	.435	.513	.065	.848	.398
Other shows	-.318	.262	-.104	-1.214	.226

*News was excluded from the model because it had a tolerance of 0.000.

Table 6

Standard Multiple Regression of Proportional Viewing of Sitcoms on Attitude Toward Marriage

Multiple R:	.146
R square:	.021
Standard Error:	.5894
F value:	4.092, p=.045

	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square
Regression	1	1.421	1.421
Residual	188	65.311	.347

Regression	b	SE b	Beta	T	Sig T
Sitcoms	-.421	.208	-.146	-2.023	.045

Table 7

Standard Multiple Regression of Age, Ethnicity, Gender, Marital Status of Self and Parents, Education Level and Estimated Divorce Rate on Attitude Toward Marriage

Multiple R:	.211
R square:	.044
Standard Error:	.5949
F value:	.866, p=.557

	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Square
Regression	9	2.758	.306
Residual	168	59.454	.354

Regression	b	SE b	Beta	T	Sig T
Age	-.005	.004	-.125	-1.236	.218
Ethnicity	-.058	.139	-.033	-.418	.677
Gender	.026	.103	.022	.257	.797
Education	.041	.043	.081	.966	.336
Annual income	.004	.032	.013	.131	.896
Own marital status	-.010	.107	-.008	-.089	.929
Parents' marital status	.251	.112	.181	2.246	.026
Estimated divorce rate	-.001	.004	-.025	-.329	.743
Television credibility	-.048	.1131	-.033	-.421	.674

Table 8

Mean Attitude Toward Marriage of Participants with Married Parents by Participants with Unmarried Parents*

	Parents Married	Parents Unmarried
Mean attitude toward marriage T=-2.080, p=.041	3.6805	3.4629

*Higher scores indicate a more positive attitude.

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Partisan Politics in Popular American Political Movies:
An Analysis of the Framing of Republican Villains in *Dave*, *The American President* and *The Contender*

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Partisan Politics in Popular American Political Movies:
An Analysis of the Framing of Republican Villains in *Dave*, *The American President* and *The Contender*

Abstract:

Politician-as-villain is a common representation in American film. However, in this classic theme, the politician is often set in opposition to the average citizen. When the heroes and villains are all politicians, which characters are heroes and which are villains? This paper examines three movies in which the heroes and the villains are all politicians. It explores how movies construct villains and partisanship finding in all three cases that the villains are Republican.

Hollywood and Politics

The intersection between Hollywood and politics is complex and dynamic. Both court and criticize one another. Candidates fundraise in Hollywood and also criticize the violence, sex and language in motion pictures and television. Hollywood opens its deep pockets, but has a longstanding tradition of portraying politicians as corrupt and villainous. Edelman (1994) presents the following scene from "the gangster comedy" *You and Me* (1938) as an exemplar of Hollywood's take on politicians.

> "Only the biggest sap in the world thinks crime pays in dividends," observes Sylvia Sidney, cast as a now-upright ex-con who's offering some of her fellow former jailbirds a lesson in economics. "But sister," protests one of her reluctant students, "you ain't tryin' to tell us that the big shots make more than [$113.33 per man per robbery]?" Retorts Sidney, "The big shots ain't little crooks like you. They're politicians" (p. 323).

Both the Hollywood and political cadres have tremendous power and financial resources. Both socially construct reality; politicians create and highlight issues through campaigns and legislation while Hollywood productions, and the celebrities that star in them, provide a cultural compass indicating what is possible and acceptable in fashion, discourse, relationships and politics. The laws politicians pass affect us all, while the products of Hollywood reach enormous audiences. They are essentially two elite groups and both blend the boundaries between the two, playing the part of the other.

For example, politicians have borrowed a few tricks from Hollywood. Some candidates have stylists or image consultants. Candidate and officeholder appearances are often staged to create good visuals for television (think of Clinton announcing the designation of national parklands with the Grand Canyon as a backdrop or Reagan on the beaches of Normandy). Motion picture-

style documentaries on presidential candidates are shown during party conventions (which are broadcast on national television). Also, political candidates and officeholders (as well as media pundits) attempt to appeal to their audiences through pop cultural references from movies. Reagan asked us to "Win one for the Gipper." Bush borrowed a line from *Dirty Harry* when he said, "Read my lips." And, in the 1993 Texas special election to fill a vacant senate seat, Bob Krueger's and (now Sen.) Kay Bailey Hutchison's commercials traded barbs from *The Terminator*, culminating with "Hasta la vista Bobby."

Hollywood dabbles in politics as well. Celebrities regularly use their popularity to advocate causes and testify before Congress. Examples include Mary Tyler Moore testifying about Diabetes, Michael J. Fox advocating Parkinson's research, and Ed Begley, Jr. rallying behind environmental issues. In addition to Ronald Reagan, a number of celebrities have gone on to hold elected office, such as the late Rep. Sonny Bono, former Rep. Fred Grandy (Gopher on the TV series *The Love Boat*), and Sen. Fred Thompson.[1]

Despite the political activities of many leading members of the film and television industry, the political nature of their products is often denied. Rather than thinking of all products as political, a few films—"liberal social conscious movies à la Stanley Kramer, political thrillers by Costa-Gavras, anti war films, satires on the American political system, and the like"—are classified as part of a "political film" genre. This allows other products to be labeled as "merely entertainment" (Crowdus, 1994: p. xi). However, to deny politics is to deny our humanity. Humans are political by nature and so are our productions.

> Thus, even though a film may not have been motivated by any conscious political intentions on the part of the filmmaker, it may nevertheless be rich in political implications..."Trust the tale, not the teller," is especially relevant in light of the film industry's frequent pronouncements about the political innocence of its films. Indeed, it can be argued that political "messages" in Hollywood films are all the more influential in that they come cloaked in the guise of "entertainment." A clearly polemical film like Oliver Stone's *JFK* will stir controversy and charges of political bias or even "propaganda," but the most insidious propaganda, which almost always goes unremarked or unchallenged, is often that which attempts to pass itself off as "entertainment" (Crowdus 1994, p. xi).

Even though Hollywood tries to avoid political implications in their productions, three recent films, *Dave*, *The American President* and *The Contender*, deal explicitly with politicians; the majority of characters are political in partisan ways. As mentioned earlier, the politician-as-villain is a common representation in film. However, the politician is often set in opposition to "a regular guy." *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* is a good example of the politician-villain vs. the average-citizen hero, a David and Goliath replay. However, in the three more recent releases to be analyzed here the good guys and the bad guys are all politicians, and in all three, the bad guys are Republicans.[2]

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[1] Sen. Thompson, who recently returned to acting, was a government lawyer prior to his entertainment career. He worked for the U.S. Attorney's Office and Gov. Lamar Alexander. However, his first campaign for political office occurred after his movie and television work.

[2] In Dave, the title character begins as an average citizen. However, while he retains his idealism and some naivete, he is successfully impersonating the president, and thus has all the power of an actual politician.

Constructing Characters: A Framing Approach

The theoretical lens through which this analysis will be conducted is media framing. Scholars have conceptualized framing in a number of different ways. "Frame" has been used to describe internal and individual cognitive structures akin to Graber's (1988) concept of schema. The term is also used to describe the organizing ideas used in news texts. Tankard et al. (1991) conducted an extensive review of framing literature and synthesized the following definition: "A frame is a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion and elaboration" (p. 5). The concept of framing is often used in discussions of politics. Candidates and interest groups attempt to frame issues in the most beneficial light. Whoever controls the framing of issues controls the debate.

Political communication studies often ignore the effects of popular culture, focusing instead on effects of newscasts and newspapers (See Jones 2001 and Paletz 1998). In some ways, American entertainment products may be more influential than news. The entertainment industry is huge and pervasive (Asner 1994), news and entertainment genres continue to blend (Jones 2001) and, excluding a post-Sept. 11 spike in viewership, news audiences have been declining (Holloway 2000). In America, if someone misses a movie while it is in the theaters, it eventually comes out on video, pay-per-view, premium cable channels, basic cable channels and often network television as well. Moreover, the content of a film does not change (except some slight editing for TV) over time as news stories do; films are repeated over and over, and persistence is cited

by Gitlin as contributing to the power of frames. "Films and TV programs...*are* the reality on which many viewers draw for ideas about the world around them" (Norden, 2000: p. 52).

The dominance of journalism in effects studies explains why discussions of media frames are often limited to news frames, although I believe it can be extended to film and fiction as well. This extension becomes more apparent when framing is examined in terms of social construction of reality, cognitive structures, narrative and recurrent themes.

Multiple scholars have described framing as constructing social reality. Tuchman (1978) and Gitlin (1980) deal with this topic in their books. While both focus on news framing, they also recognize the power of entertainment to influence people. Tuchman, citing several studies on the effects of television concludes, "Entertainment appears to have an awesome impact upon viewers' attitudes and beliefs" (p. 3). Gitlin explains the media's broader role in constructing reality:

> Of all the institutions of daily life, the media specialize in orchestrating everyday consciousness—by virtue of their pervasiveness, their accessibility, their centralized symbolic capacity...they certify reality *as reality*...To put it simply: the mass media have become core systems for the distribution of ideology (pp. 1-2).

While Tuchman writes: "the act of making news is the act of constructing reality itself rather than a picture of reality" (p. 12). There are many aspects to news stories, many different ways to organize and present information, many potential sources and many points of view. "When journalists choose content and frame it, they are constructing reality for their audiences, particularly when the story concerns unfamiliar matters and there is no easy way to test its accuracy" (Graber 1989, p. 147). Similarly, screenwriters, directors and editors also select

characters, themes and scenes to include or exclude. Stone (2000) claims that American moviegoers' desires for information about other people and places are increased when a film seems to provide intimate knowledge of people and places prominent in news coverage or central to our culture identity. All three films examined in this study deal with the president, the person elected to represent us, a national symbol and a daily newsmaker.

Whether fictional movies or non-fictional news, the raw material to be selected from is drawn from culturally shared realities that exist in individuals' cognitive structures. "Reporters rely on images stored in the memories of their audiences. They use culturally and socially appropriate cues to evoke these schemata to supplement information applied to the story" (Graber 1989, p. 148). In a similar way, when screenwriters write about more realistic events (for example, politics as opposed to science fiction), they must also draw upon reality. Their premises must be plausible. These commonalties between fiction and news might help explain why people sometimes believe what they see in movies or television is real. Preteens found *Dave* so realistic, they labeled it "educational" (Smith 1993). All three use extensive footage of Washington monuments and White House interiors (in many cases, replicas of actual rooms), adding to their realism.

In both film and news, the process of selection and exclusion, results in a narrative form–a story–and scholarly discourse on framing routinely borrows terms from storytelling and fiction to describe news coverage. Sources and subjects are "characters" or "actors." Journalists are "narrators." The idea of news as a story may run contrary to professional journalists' notions that they simply report the facts, but as Gamson (1989) explains,

> Facts have no intrinsic meaning. They take on their meaning by being embedded in a frame or a story line that organizes them and gives them coherence, selecting certain ones to emphasize while ignoring others. Think of newscasts as telling stories about the world rather than as presenting "information," even though the stories, of course, include factual elements (p. 157).

Narratives in film involve the reader in a pattern of anticipation and satisfaction (See Stone 2000). "When the tension resolves or when the protagonist grows to some heightened political awareness, the viewer can approach the film's resolution as his or her own" (p. 85). My reactions to *The American President* and *The Contender* exemplify this point. The heroes in these films had moments of triumph while giving speeches enumerating their political beliefs. Even though, I agreed with almost nothing I heard, I was wrapped up in the drama and cheering for the heroes—characters created to elicit audience identification.

Recurrent themes appear in news and movies. Good vs. evil is a classic literary theme and is prevalent in movies as well. Journalism often pits two parties or interests against one another. Explicitly labeling them "good" and "evil" would conflict with the journalistic norms of objectivity, fairness and balance, but that does not mean that those judgements are not intimated. Iyengar (1991) believes one of the media's most important framing techniques is implying responsibility for causing or solving a particular problem. Thus, villains cause problems, while heroes solve them.

Many studies have examined the ways in which political candidates and leaders are framed in the media. Gitlin (1980) said that media certify leaders (p. 3). In fiction, an even wider array of tools, i.e. costume, dialogue, and lighting are available to construct and frame characters, making framing an apt theory to guide this investigation.

Analyzing Three Plots on Politics

As mentioned earlier, the three films examined in this study are *Dave*, *The American President* and *The Contender*.

Dave (1993) is a romantic comedy. Kevin Kline plays Dave Kovic, a man with a striking resemblance to the president (also played by Kevin Kline). For "security reasons," the Secret Service asks Kovic to impersonate the president. Meanwhile, the real president has a brain aneurysm during the climactic moments of an encounter with one of his secretaries. The Chief of Staff (Frank Langella) hatches a scheme to discredit the vice-president with a scandal and keep Dave pretending to be the President, all the while controlling Dave's actions to further his own presidential ambitions. However, things go awry when the First Lady (Sigourney Weaver), who is estranged from her husband, discovers the ruse and becomes attracted to Dave who begins to assert his own ideas on how to run the country. The film is written by Gary Ross and directed by Ivan Reitman.

The American President (1995) incorporates comedy, drama and romance. Michael Douglas plays a widower president with a teenage daughter. Three years into his term, he meets an environmental lobbyist (Annette Bening) and decides to date her. Things get complicated when Republican Senator Bob Rumson (Richard Dreyfuss) seizes upon the opportunity to enhance his own image by criticizing the president for a lack of moral values and lack of leadership. The president's approval ratings drop, his legislative agenda is

jeopardized and the next election looms. The film is written by Aaron Sorkin and directed by Rob Reiner.

The Contender (2000) is a drama. After the death of his vice-president, President Jackson Evans (Jeff Bridges) has the opportunity to appoint a new VP. He chooses to appoint a woman, the first woman, Sen. Laine Hanson (Joan Allen) who switched from the Republican to the Democrat party. Republican Congressman Sheldon "Shelly" Runyon (Gary Oldman) embarks on a conspiratorial campaign to impugn her character by bringing up allegations of sexual indiscretions. She refuses to dignify the charges with a response or fight back despite the urging of the president who sees his legacy endangered. This film is written and directed by Rod Lurie.

All three are relatively recent releases, deal with partisan politics, are set in Washington D.C. and include a fictional American president as one of the main characters.

They are not the only recent films dealing with politics and politicians, but they differ in important ways. Unlike *Nixon*, *JFK*, *Primary Colors*, *Dick* and *Thirteen Days*, they are purely fiction. Unlike *Absolute Power* (where the focus is on the thief who witnessed Secret Service agents shoot the president's mistress during a tryst-gone-wrong) or *Murder at 1600* (where the protagonists are a cop and secret service agent trying to solve a murder that took place in the White House), these three movies focus explicitly on politics and politicians. The majority of the characters in these three films are politicians. The films utilize the good vs. evil theme, and because they mainly have partisan politicians to choose from, it is particularly interesting to see which characters are framed as the villains.

Typically, framing studies utilize both quantitative and qualitative content analysis. For this study, a qualitative approach will be used. Several aspects preclude the use of a quantitative method. First, the three films were not selected randomly. They are not representative of films in general or films about politics specifically. Additionally, it is unlikely that counting tallies from three cases would reveal much, if anything. Even if a quantitative approach were somehow feasible, the results would lack the rich detail needed to investigate the specific ways in which characters in these films are constructed and framed.

In another departure from past framing studies, I will use textual analysis rather than content analysis. Graber (1989), Gamson (1989) and Barkin (1989) all comment upon the difficulty of coding for manifest content alone with an audiovisual text. The following questions will guide my inquiry.

RQ 1: How are characters constructed as Republicans?

RQ 2: How are those Republican characters constructed as villains?

Recognizing Republicans

Several clues, both internal and external to the films, reveal the partisanship of the characters. Internally, the characters are not only defined by their dialogue, actions and appearances, but also in opposition to other characters in the film. External clues come from the politics of the artists (actors, directors, writers, etc.) involved in the production of the movies and from film critics' reviews. This media coverage plays two important roles. First, the articles are additional readings on the films' politics, heroes and villains. Second, the

articles both create and reinforce partisan political interpretations of the movies when the fictional politicians are inevitably compared to real-life leaders.

Both *The Contender* and *The American President* utilize explicit party labels in their narratives. The main characters are Democratic presidents, their aides and in the case of *The Contender*, a Democratic vice-presidential nominee. Those in opposition to the Democratic presidents are Republicans. *Dave*, on the other hand does not use party labels, although partisanship can be inferred. One critic cited *Dave*'s "progressive slant" (Parks 1995) which contrasts with that of the president he is impersonating. President Mitchell wears a Yale sweatshirt, an alma mater he shares with George H.W. Bush, who critics contend he was modeled after (Welsh 1993 and Dowd 1993). One even noticed " a shot of an oil painting of Millie, the Bushes' English springer spaniel, based on a real painting that was given to the Bushes by the Secret Service and displayed in the White House residence during their tenure." Dave, while following President Mitchell's schedule, also participates in a lesson on nutrition presented by Arnold Schwarzenegger, President H.W. Bush's chair of the President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

Many additional clues to partisanship come through the real-life pundits and politicians that appear as themselves in the movie. Ben Stein, a former Nixon administration official, is greeted warmly at White House Chief of Staff Bob Alexander's party. When Dave first begins to impersonate the president, a McLoughlin Group newscast roundtable on the reincarnation of the president provides predictable results. Conservative Fred Barnes gives Dave "An eight. The zombie is gone," while the more liberal Eleanor Clift says, "It's a three; the zombie will return." Later, as Dave begins to assert his own progressive

agenda—promising a job for anyone that wants one—Democrats praise him, while Republicans protest in a news-style montage of clips where speakers are identified by name and party affiliation. Senators Christopher Dodd (D-Conn.), Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Paul Simon (D-Ill.) all laud the initiative. However, Sen. Alan Simpson, a Wyoming Republican says, "We're up here trying to carry the water for him. I've carried more water for him than Gunga din for God's sake. And now, to say this—he's out to lunch. The lights are on, but nobody's home down there." Simpson's statement is perhaps the most revealing of all, because "carrying water" refers to supporting the Congressional initiatives of their party's president. Since Simpson is a Republican (identified on screen by name and party), so is President Mitchell and his Chief of Staff Bob Alexander. Others have picked up the party affiliation as well.

> The ruthless, lying, power-hungry White House chief of staff, played by the wonderfully oily Frank Langella, has plenty of historical precedent...it wasn't so long ago that John Sununu, George Bush's chief of staff, was threatening to use a chain saw on the tender body parts of a Chamber of Commerce official who did not go along with a White House position (Dowd 1993).

He also is compared to Bob Haldeman, Chief of Staff for Nixon. (Dowd 1993).

Partisanship is also constructed through the characters' actions and dialogue. Dave discusses jobs programs while President Mitchell talks tough on crime (an issue owned by Republicans at the time of this movie's release) and the courts:

> We must "standardize parole so that a criminal will not be returned to the street until he has paid his debt to society" and uphold "a system of laws of the people, by the people and for all the *descent* people of this land. God Bless you, God bless America!"

When Dave massages the budget to save a homeless shelter after Bob Alexander vetoed its funding bill, Alexander says, "Why would I want to save a homeless shelter?"

American President president, Andrew Shepherd, a Democrat, delivers a rousing address on many liberal touchstones: promoting gun control, the ACLU, the right to burn American flags and tough environmental regulations while Republican presidential hopeful Bob Rumson attacks Shepherd on character, for "having never served one day in uniform," and his lifestyle choices that run contrary to "traditional American values," all arguments eerily similar to those used by Republicans against Bill Clinton. Shepherd and his staff meet with the Global Defense Council, an environmental group, while Rumson speaks before the Conservative Coalition of America. Media comparisons have likened President Shepherd to Clinton (Parks 1995, McCarthy 1995) and "a Kennedy without the dirty laundry" (McCarthy 1995), while Sen. Rumson, a Kansas Republican was described as "a Bob Dole clone who is itching to do some character assassination," (Turan 1995, see also McCarthy 1995) and a "sneering Phil Gramm" (Carr 1995) "in demeanor and aggressiveness" (McCarthy 1995).

In *The Contender*, Hanson delivers a speech similar to Shepherd's, listing a litany of traditionally liberal-owned issues she supports such as a woman's right to choose, the elimination of the death penalty, "every gun out of every home, period," campaign finance reform and an end to religious fanaticism. An atheist, she says, "My church is the chapel of democracy." Runyon, on the other hand, shouts down Hanson with his pro-life position during the confirmation hearing. Hanson walks through a cheering crowd of NOW-sign carrying women, while Runyon is clearly set in opposition to her in his misogyny (not a Republican view

per se but certainly conservative in comparison to Hanson's feminism). Again, news media highlight partisan comparisons. Oldman (Sen. Runyon) is "Nixon to Bridges' [President Jackson Evans] Kennedy, from his perspiring upper lip to his bitterness and paranoia" (Westbrook 2001).

Finally, the politics of the artists involved in the production of the films enlighten the politics of the productions. *Dave* screenwriter Gary Ross worked as a speechwriter for the 1988 Dukakis campaign. *Contender* director Rod Lurie describes his politics as "far Left" (Williams 2001). Screenwriter Aaron Sorkin, director Rob Reiner and a number of actors in *The American President* have liberal leanings (Carr 1995 and Stone 1995).

> Whether it's intended as insider comic irony or not, the cast even includes Martin Sheen, one of Hollywood's most active, and most-arrested, liberal protesters, as the most conservative of the president's advisers. Richard Dreyfuss, another supporter of liberal causes, plays the Republican presidential candidate with scene-eating gusto (Parks 1995).

It is not surprising that those involved with all three movies espouse left-leaning views. Powers, Rothman and Rothman (1996) describe the Hollywood center as farther to the left than that of the American public (and to the right of most in academia). This common ideology is important in constructing villains, often drawn by describing the "other." When liberal-leaning artists are faced with a choice between two parties for the selection of villains and heroes, it seems logical, because of their partisan and ideological preferences, that Republicans will be villains and Democrats, whom they identify with more closely, will be heroes.

Verifying Villainy

Every good story must have conflict. One of the most common conflicts in modern entertainment is that of good versus evil (Burke 1990). The characters that create and respond to that conflict are the heroes and villains. Many actors relish the role of a good villain. The presence of a villainous character actor can be the first clue as to who will be the foil, and villain character actors are present in two of the selected films. Gary Oldman, Republican Congressman Sheldon 'Shelly' Runyon in *The Contender*, is one such character actor. In the last decade, he has played a number of leading villains including: Lee Harvey Oswald in *JFK*, Mason Verger in *Hannibal*, Dr. Zachary Smith in *Lost in Space*, terrorist Egor Korshunov in *Air Force One*, Jean-Baptiste Emanuel Zorg in *The Fifth Element*, Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale in *The Scarlet Letter*, and Prince Vlad Dracula in *Dracula*. Although not quite as well known, Frank Langella, Republican Chief of Staff Bob Alexander in *Dave*, has also made a name for himself playing villains. Film critic Leonard Maltin (1994) writes that Langella has worked more recently "as a character actor, particularly in villainous parts." In recognizing character actors who usually play villains, viewers ready themselves to expect the worst from that particular character, and Oldman and Langella do not disappoint.

While Richard Dreyfuss is not a villainous character actor, he has "played his fair share of irritating pests and brash, ambitious hustlers" (IMDB mini bio). In *The American President*, he is cast as the villain Republican Senate Minority Leader Bob Rumson. In the case of this movie, character names provide clues. In morality plays, villains were often named after the vice they embodied, usually one of the seven deadly sins (Stone 2000). Halving "Rumson" results in "rum"

and "son," or "son of rum." This could connote the vice of excess (drinking) or symbolize a politician who is "drunk" with power. This analogy is made sharper when one considers the name of the hero-president, "Andrew Shepherd." What a perfect name for a leader. It is rich with the Biblical symbolism of The Good Shepherd parable and intimates a caring leader who looks after, protects and guides those in his charge.

A number of other methods are commonly used to frame villains in film. The villains' words and deeds, costuming, specific lighting and camera angles and descriptions in newspaper movie reviews all reveal their villainy. Shakespeare's Richard III, has been described as the classic villain (Salaman 2000). In many ways, the villains in these films are reincarnations of Richard. Richard wanted to be king and murdered those who stood in his way (Salaman 2000). These villains desire the presidency and assassinate the characters of their enemies.

It is common for villains to possess some physical deformity or appear less attractive in comparison with the hero. Richard III is often portrayed as a hunchback (Salaman 2000). Sometimes ugliness is exaggerated in the extreme as it is in the film adaptation of the Dick Tracy comic book series. Villains play the ugly foils to the attractive heroes.

> What animates this grim-mouthed crime fighter are his enemies, those deliciously deformed, defiled, mumbling and mutated mounds of sheer evil...Warren Beatty the director scooped up an odd dozen of Gould's most repulsive pusses for his hit Dick Tracy film, then let them overwhelm—if not overrun—Warren Beatty the star (Allis 1990).

In the three movies examined here, the physical appearances of the villains are not exaggeratedly unattractive, however none of them are customary, handsome, romantic leads like Michael Douglas, Harrison Ford or Denzel Washington

either. Maltin (1994) says of Langella, "neither his looks, nor his aloof demeanor, were suited to conventional leading-man roles." Oldman's nondescript looks allow him to morph into many different types of characters, and of the three examined here, his physical appearance is altered most. He is barely recognizable, with a receding hairline, age makeup and large, thick glasses. Dreyfus, whose physical appearance is largely unaltered, also sports large, thick glasses, in contrast to the stylish frames worn by the president's personal secretary and other characters in the film. Langella's appearance is not noticeably altered. His character, Bob Alexander, is frequently attired in dark suits with tightly-tied neck ties, unlike other characters in bow ties, no ties or loosely-tied ties. Relative to other characters in their respective movies, these villains smile infrequently. While waiting for the president's helicopter to land, Alexander is the lone scowling face in a sea of smiles. In *The American President*, attendees at the state dinner smile as the president and his date dance, while Dreyfus's Rumson is first expressionless and then scheming. Oldman's Runyon suffers a sweaty upper lip (like Nixon, Westbrook 2001) and has a stilted style of speech.

Lighting and camera angles are also used to portray villains. In a climactic scene of *Wall Street*, insider trader Gordon Gekko stands mostly in darkness with a hard sidelight casting ominous shadows across his face (p. 82, Stone 2000).

> One of the best-known features of *Citizen Kane* is its exploitation of the shifting angle of the camera...the early shots of the William Randolph Hearst figure as a child are taken from above and thus makes him appear unthreatening, in maturity he is shot at eye level. Ultimately he is shot from below, so that he appears on the screen as a towering, even menacing, evil figure (Mesaris 1994).

Cabaret uses both camera angles and lighting to depict Nazism, Berliner decadence and the evil forces of anti-Semitism. "The contrasts between natural

and artificial light," dizzying camera movement, extreme close-ups, inter-cut shots, odd perspectives and repetition of the same camera angle at the beginning and end combine to provide a distorted view of the club (Rodda 1994). Lighting and camera angle techniques are more difficult to detect in the films analyzed here because they do not employ gross exaggerations of these techniques employed film noir or *Cabaret*. While *Contender* director Rod Lurie makes use of changing camera angles, zooming and quick pans, he uses these throughout and does not seem to give any special treatment to the villain. *American President* director Rob Reiner makes use of a zooming camera as Rumson attacks the president in stump speeches. The scenes generally start with a full-crowd shot from the back of the room. As each assertion is made, each one more intense and vicious than the last, the view cuts to a closer shot, until the screen becomes Rumson's talking-head—analogous to the in-your-face style of character attacks. It is a camera position never used on the president—who refuses to engage in a character debate up to that point—until he makes his climactic speech at the end of the movie. Then, the camera zooms in even more closely than it has with Rumson; so tight, that the president's head does not completely fit on screen. In *Dave*, director Ivan Reitman uses distant camera positions to make Dave look smaller in impressive White House rooms, such as the Oval Office and the president's bedroom. This technique is never applied to villain Bob Alexander. Lighting, on the other hand, is often employed to cast Alexander in shadow. Like the villain in *Wall Street*, Alexander is often lit harshly from the side. This results in strong shadow lines on his face, making him appear more sinister. This lighting is used with greater effect when he is plotting or performing his sinister deeds.

Techniques for Constructing Villains	*Dave* COS Bob Alexander	*The American President* Sen. Bob Rumson	*The Contender* Rep. Shelly Runyon
Actor's physical appearance altered	No.	Seems to have more gray hair than usual.	Aged, receding hairline.
Costuming	Almost always in dark suits and tightly tied ties.	Thick-rimmed, big glasses.	Thick-rimmed, big glasses.
Facial expressions/ other features	Scowling face, compared to other characters, rarely smiles.	Expressionless scheming, compared to other characters, rarely smiles.	Sweating upper lip and stilted speech.
Villain-specific camera angles	In contrast with Dave, closer in.	Crowd shots zoom in as attacks become more poignant and vicious.	N/A
Villain-specific lighting techniques	Side-lit to produce harsh shadows on face.	N/A	N/A
Ultimate Desire	To be President	To be President	To be President
Protagonist	Dave, presidential impostor	Pres. Andrew Shepherd	Pres. Jackson Evans and VP nominee Laine Hanson
Tactic of attack	Character assassination	Character assassination	Character assassination
Victory Celebrations	Delights in vetoing bills with funding for social programs while somberly humming "Hail to the Chief." Shown in true bliss, with spring in step, humming "1812 Overture" as news breaks implicating the VP in S&L scandal.	When receives FBI file picture of Wade at protest with burning flag, he smirks and begins slowly, menacingly singing in a low tone, "It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas."	N/A
Misogyny	Antagonism toward First Lady	Personal attacks on president's girlfriend Sydney Wade.	Vividly apparent through dialogue with Hanson. He targets her mainly because of her gender.
Explicit Party Label	No, but implied	Yes	Yes
Media descriptions	"ruthless, lying, power-hungry White House chief of staff" (Dowd 1993) "a role so smarmy it would do John Sununu proud" (Lowry 1993).	"sinister rival—a conservative Republican" (Purnick 1996) "Republican meanie" (McCarthy 1995)	"He's Nixon to Bridges' Kennedy, from his perspiring upper lip to his bitterness and paranoia" (Westbrook 2001).

While all of the aforementioned techniques help frame villains, ultimately they are known through their evil actions and evil words.

> In fiction, two characters can't have the same thing--whether it's money, a job or a love interest. Thus, the villain may compete with the hero...How the two go about accomplishing the objective is what makes them different...The different choices that the villain and hero make will be what causes the reader to identify with the hero. Villainous choices are not generally moral actions (Collins 2001).

In all three of these movies, the objective, the thing that cannot be shared by both hero and villain, is the presidency. The protagonists are presidents, a presidential impostor with the power of the presidency and a vice presidential nominee with the potential to ascend to the presidency. All of the villains are driven, like Richard III (Salaman 2000), by their relentless desire for power of the highest office in the land. The contest in *The Contender* is further complicated by the history shared between heroes and the villain. Runyon and Evans have tangled previously for the office, and Democratic Sen. Hanson was formerly a member of the Republican party with Runyon. While Richard III, ordered and committed murder to accomplish his goals, these villains orchestrate and commit character assassination to accomplish their goals.

Impugning Vice President Nance's (Ben Kingsley) character is key to *Dave* villain, Bob Alexander's plans to capture the presidency. With the VP impeached, Dave will appoint Alexander vice president and conveniently have another stroke—or so Alexander's machinations go. After sending the "boy scout" vice president on an African good will tour, Alexander doctors and leaks evidence connecting the vice president to an S&L scandal. In addition to violating the constitution and obstructing justice, Alexander is just plain mean. He relishes in vetoing a bill to fund homeless shelters and job programs and

plows over women and children in a White House tour group as he rushes to confront Dave for calling an unauthorized press conference. Many of his lines reveal his arrogance and blind ambition. "It's [the presidency] all mine now, and no boy scout is going to take it away because he happens to be vice president." After Dave manages to save a homeless shelter bill, Alexander goes on a tirade:

> He [Dave] is an ordinary person. I can kill an ordinary person. I can kill a hundred ordinary people...It's not his job. It's my job! Was he on the Trilateral Commission? Was he a senator? Was he in Who's Who nine years in a row? I'll destroy him Alan. I'll shred the bastard. I'll lock him away for good.

Smoking cigars and drinking with a group of white men, in an opulent, dimly lit room, minority leader Bob Rumson, *The American President*'s villain, orchestrates a character attack on the President (something they were unable to do in the first campaign because of the proximity of the president's wife's death). Rather than fighting man-to-man on issues, Rumson's path of attack is through the president's girlfriend, Sydney Ellen Wade. One of his aides steals a photo from Sydney's FBI file. The photo, which shows her at a protest where a flag burning is occurring, is leaked to the media. Rumson refers to Sydney as the "First Mistress" and on a TV talk show accuses her of trading sexual favors for votes when she was lobbying for Virginia schoolteachers. Sydney and the president stick to a "no comment" strategy, but to the president she says, "How do you have patience for people who claim they love America but clearly can't stand Americans?"

While villainy in *Dave* and *The American President* is mitigated by comedic elements, *The Contender*, a drama, lacks those, and its more sinister villain has a more substantial role in the film. Runyon conceives and implements a smear campaign to paint Hanson as a sex-crazed home-wrecker. The dialogue

surrounding the character assassination in this movie is loaded with murder analogies and death symbolism. From a dark room, Runyan leads five white men in a discussion of destroying Laine Hanson. From the shadows, a private investigator, paid by a "concerned citizen," steps forth:

> We have to go after her. We have to make her wade in her own blood...Stab a man in the navel and that's all she wrote. The bleeding is so swift and severe that would not matter if Jesus himself put his hand on the wound [Runyon leans his head back and exhales a huge puff of smoke, with a satisfied expression on his face]. The bastard is dead. We have to gut the bitch in the belly. We all have to understand that we are going to obliterate a life, [here Runyon is moving his head in short nods of approval] but we will get you the vice presidency, governor.

The morning of the hearings begins with a sunrise shot of the Washington monument. The obelisk protrudes into the blood-red sky like a knife. The view cuts to Runyon's office, where he is speaking to rally the troops to war. Ironically, he begins by saying that their actions will spark a "new birth of national honesty," when his behavior is anything but honest. He continues: "Laine Hanson is a cancer. A cancer of liberalism. A cancer of disloyalty. Her nomination itself is the cancer of affirmative action. What we will say with voices stentorian is that she is the cancer of virtuous decay." As Runyon speaks, the camera cuts back and forth between the office and Laine running in a cemetery. She stops, coughing and gasping a bit from the exertion. Clad in a white jogging suit, as the camera moves out to a wider angle, Hanson becomes smaller, blending in as another one of the tombstones.

As the hearings progress, Runyon precisely executes his plan. He leaks unsubstantiated reports of her sexual exploits and pictures, supposedly of her in the act, to an online media outlet, sets-up an ambush on a TV interview program and interjects lies of prostitution into the innuendo of casual sex. What infuriates

the viewer and the heroine-victim, is that his speech is so polite. Without context, conversations would seem like perfectly pleasant exchanges. For example, while urging everyone to boycott the online media outlet to whom he leaked information and photos, calling it pornography, he slowly reads the URL twice. Additionally there are hints that the Congressman is racist. During a courtside meeting with freshman Congressman Webster (Christian Slater), Runyon yells, "Hey, Toby! Foul!" and then turning to Webster says, "You can't trust those f--king people." As the camera moves back, in the lower background, it reveals a basketball game being played. Three of the five men on the court are African American.

One last trait these three villains have in common with each other and with Richard III is misogyny. Bob Alexander is consistently hostile toward the first lady, and Bob Rumson attacks the president's girlfriend. While Runyon's opposition to Laine Hanson's confirmation is not entirely about her gender (there is her party switching and his intransigence toward Pres. Evans), his speech and attacks are gendered. When speaking to the president's aides, he refers to Hanson as "your girl." He attacks her "liberated" sexuality. Before the hearings, Laine and Runyon have a lunch meeting. She arrives a few minutes late to find that Runyon is already eating, and nearly finished despite his statement that he ordered *because* she was late. He announces that he has already ordered a Porterhouse steak for her. Even when she insists that she does not eat meat, he is still trying to order the steak for her asserting his dominance and selection of a manly meal. As he noisily chews his steak and licks his teeth, Laine confronts him on his impending smear attack, saying, "You must really hate me Shelly." He says:

> Oh I don't hate you. It's not possible to hate you. You're a um, how did Reynolds put it? Groovy. You're a groovy chic...Greatness is the orphan of urgency Laine. Greatness only emerges when we need it most, in times of war or calamity. Now, I can't ask somebody to be a Kennedy or a Lincoln. They were *men* [spoken with emphasis] created by their times. What I can ask for is the promise of greatness, and that, madam senator, you don't have.

In the end, predictably, all of the villains lose. In an address to Congress, Dave provides proof of Vice President Nance's innocence while incriminating Bob Alexander. The vice president takes charge of the country after Dave's "stroke," and Alexander is indicted and jailed for his role in the S&L scandal. While the viewer never sees the demise of *The American President*'s Bob Rumson, it is intimated in President Shepherd's triumphant address: "Bob, your 15 minutes are up...My name is Andrew Shepherd and I *am* the President of the United States."[3] *Contender* villain Shelly Runyon is tricked into publicly attaching himself to Evan's second choice for vice president—a man who is subsequently arrested for his efforts to capture the nomination. Congressman Runyon attempts to skulk out of President Evans triumphant address to both Houses in which he asks for Hanson's confirmation. The President points at him:

> Mr. Runyon, You may walk out on me. You may walk out on this body, but you cannot walk out on the will of the American people. Americans...will forgive you, but they will not forget. Hate and ego have no place residing in what my good friend Laine Hanson calls the chapel of democracy.

[3] This line is a take on the phrase Rumson repeats in his stump speeches. "My name is Bob Rumson, and I am running for President."

Conclusions

Heroes and villains can be found in almost every story. In Hollywood movies, when politicians are characters, usually they serve as the villain in opposition to the average-citizen hero. However, when a cast of characters is entirely made up of politicians, it is inevitable that both the hero and the villain will be a politician. In three recent movies, Democrats were the heroes, while Republicans were the villains.

Detailed information was gathered and presented on the ways in which characters were framed both as Republicans and as villains. From *Dave*, which made no explicit mention of partisan labels, to *The Contender*, the use of partisan labels increased. In a way, the villains became more villainous as well. Congressman Runyon (Gary Oldman) from *The Contender* is an easy choice for the most nefarious. While technically, Bob Alexander (Frank Langella), from *Dave*, committed more illegal acts than Sen. Bob Rumson (Richard Dreyfuss) from *The American President*, Alexander's villainy was mitigated by the comic aspects of the film, and because little on-screen time was devoted to the negative effects of his behavior, especially those effecting the hero, Dave. Following this logic, as use of partisan labels has increased, villains have become more villainous as well.

A primary limitation of this study is that textual analysis is not equipped to examine audience reactions or any perspective other than my own reading. Audiences are not uniform; nor are their reactions or the effects upon them universal. Time is an additional confounding aspect. A reading of *The American President* is most certainly altered when viewed from our post Clinton-Lewinsky

world rather than when the movie first came out, before anyone had ever heard of a White House intern named Monica. Finally, just as I propose that the dominant liberal ideology of Hollywood dictates villains will be Republican, I am willing to concede that my partisanship and ideology intruded upon my analysis, although I have tried to be rigorous, systematic and fair in my investigation.

Two possible consequences of the framing of Republican villains may be inferred. First, framing helps to define the terms that are accessible and acceptable for use. Terms that the media use often become the common language (Tuchman 1978).

> Every day, directly or indirectly, by statement and omission, in pictures and words, in entertainment and news and advertisement, the mass media produce fields of definition and association, symbol and rhetoric through which ideology becomes manifest and concrete. One important task for ideology is to define—and also define away—its opposition (Gitlin 1980: p. 2).

Second, frames may influence how people perceive Republicans. Thus, the more Republicans are framed as villains, the easier it is to label them villains in everyday discourse and the more likely that Republicans will be thought of as villainous.

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ESIG

Queer as Folk Audience Study:

Gay Males, Social Support and Para-social

Involvement in Identity Construction or Reinforcement

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Abstract

This paper investigated how the gay male audience, watching *Queer as Folk*, was actively involved in this drama, and was likely to engage in Para-social interactions and self-identifications with television characters, which in turn would help them to construct a positive gay identity. This study extended the findings on psychological origins of media uses in the tradition of uses and gratifications, particularly in terms of how the audience developed or reinforced self-identity while using media content.

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Introduction

It has been argued that most gay males living in a largely homophobic environment encounter serious challenges to their development of self-identity due to the limited social support they received (Saulnier, 1990) and limited access to role models (McKee, 2000). To compensate for these lacks, McKee (2000) found that gay males used the mass media (especially soap operas and other fictional programs) to forge a social self-identity, to find a sense of community, and to develop their self-identity by identifying and interacting with various TV characters and contents.

Beyond the difficulty of defining same sex orientation usually referred to as homosexuality, which has commonly been described as same sex attraction or fantasies based on same sex attraction (Klein, Sepekoff, & Wolf, 1985; Freud, 1971; Isay, 1989); Larry Gross (1994) contends that not only it is difficult to portray gay characters because of the ambiguity that defines homosexuality but also because of the fact that television, as an institution, reflects the social norms and order of the majority and not minorities.

However, one of the few television shows that represents the view of the gay community is the Showtime Network's *Queer as Folk* series, which has reversed many of the misrepresentations and stereotypes often shown on TV in past decades. *Queer as Folk* has been adapted for the American market from an original English version of the same name, defined by many critics as "ground-breaking" due to its stray- from-the mainstream point of view or unusually intimate and close portrayal of the reality of gay characters. This mini-drama takes place in Pittsburgh and portrays a group of middle class gay friends dealing with a multiplicity of relationships that include friends, family, work, long-term relationships, and sex (Showtime, 2001).

Could the close-to-reality portrayals of gay life on *Queer as Folk* provide an emotional outlet for gay men in the process of developing or reinforcing their self-identity, especially given the limited resources afforded them? Would the gay audience respond to the gay characters in the program if the characters were perceived as someone like them? A long-standing television phenomenon in which the viewers not only developed an affective involvement with the media character (Perse & Rubin, 1987), but

also engaged in different levels of identification with media characters (Cohen, 1997; Cole & Leets, 1999) was described as "para-social interaction" since Horton and Wohl (1956). Could such para-social interaction have an impact on how gay males compensated for their lack of social supports and how they developed a positive gay self-identity By incorporating the TV content that they could relate to or role models they could identify with?

The purpose of the study, therefore, is to explore the relationship between gay males' involvement in para-social interaction and identification with their favorite character(s) as well as the development of positive gay self-identity.

Literature Review

Theories on Identity Formation

Psychosocial theories of identity formation

Erickson (1963) suggested that the construction of identity was possible only in relation to others and with the social support of others, and in trying to fulfill specific identity stages that ask for the individual to successfully complete tasks, which are relevant to those different social roles that an individual has in life. Erickson (1968) added that not only social interactions and supports were important in identity construction but also the ability to identify to key people or other important figures in one's life. For example, Erickson (1968) added that being able to identify with media characters offers the viewer, who is captivated by the TV content, an opportunity to experience a social reality from another point-of-view, in order to model one's self-identity and social behavior. Erickson (1968) suggested three major components in the formation of identity in one's life, which might be challenging for a gay person. First, Erickson (1968) suggested that "there was a sense of continuity among past, present and future identifications, as identity is not simply a one-time issue" (p45). In the case of gay males, such continuity is possible only if they are able to come out and accept who they are, which is difficult in an unsupportive social environment. Second, in the process of integrating previous identifications, one typically achieves the second component of identity: defining oneself as unique. It is possible to achieve uniqueness only if the family and acquaintances are supportive and help the individual achieve identity. Saulnier (1990) suggested that young gay males who face a homophobic environment naturally receive less social support from friends

and families. Third, the final process, which refers to achieved yet not crystallized identity, is what Erickson (1968) defines as the individual, who finds his own specific niche in a broader society. Again it is more difficult for gay males to find a niche in a society where heterosexuality is the norm and sexual marginality is often unacceptable.

Egan and Cowan (1980) added that two complementary aspects were involved in identity construction, "both an internal, or psychological aspect (a fairly stable sense of who you are), and an external, or social aspect (that seems to be shared by other people in your life, who are significant to you)" (p,141). Such a concept shows that due to social stigmas and intense need to fit their social environment, gay males has a tendency to hide their identity to key people in their life. As such they may face both confusion about who they really are, and may not share some of their identity characteristics with their family and acquaintances. Peacock (2000) concluded that "patterns of development for gays start at various stages based on when the identity acceptance begins; only then can a gay person undertake successful adult development" (p.27). For example, Peacock (2000) noticed that many of his subjects dated girls during high school or even entered into marriages with women in an effort to fit a repressive society and deny unacceptable feelings.

Specific Issues about Identity Construction Among Gay Me

Identity construction heterosexual vs. homosexual males

Saulnier (1990) found that gay males received significantly less social support than their heterosexual male counterparts, particularly in terms of social support from their families. This is an important fact as this study also showed that a positive relationship was established between perceived social support and identity achievement for both homosexual and heterosexual males (p.54). It was suggested that there was a difference in identity construction between heterosexual males and homosexual males based on the fact that gay males become more dependent on internal judgments than external judgments of the acceptability of their values while, heterosexual males having a variety of resources and social support to choose from, may naturally rely more on external judgment, just because social support is highly available to them (Saulnier, 1990). Saulnier (1990) added that because of society's attitudes toward homosexuality, many gay people automatically expect to receive less social support

than others, even compared to other minorities. Other studies also found that young gay individuals facing social stigma often leads to suicidal ideation and drug use within the gay community (Kulkin, Chauvin & Percle 2000; Flowers & Buston, 2001). This is due to the fact that those adolescents, in desperate search of role models or information on homosexuality, are often presented with no information at all in school. Further, they may face a homophobic environment in their own family, which is often reinforced by negative information or stereotypes on television.

Gay Population, Television, Representation and Identity

According to Dayan (1999), the media plays an important role in the construction of identity, particularly among minorities. As it is difficult for gay men, like any other minorities to fit in a society made for the majority, gay males have to develop specific strategies to draw materials from the mass media (Dayan, 1999), which help them develop their gay identities. For example, being able to identify with TV content is one way to appropriate TV text and images that can be used for identity formation (McQuail, 1997). Hoffner and Cantor (1991) also found that television viewers had a natural desire to see characters similar to them. This is particularly true in the case of gay males that often refer to that intense desire of seeing gay characters on TV (Freidman & Epstein, 1997).

Identity, self-esteem and TV use among gay men

Even with the recall of very few images of gay characters or content on television given the invisibility of gay images on television at that time, a study reported that the gay male subjects remembered those few images, mostly from fictional programs, as having a very strong impact, particularly in making them feeling happier with themselves, as well as providing information, and offering identities to which they could aspire (McKee, 2000). Therefore, positive gay representations were considered important, particularly knowing that gay individuals have a tendency to internalize negative stereotypes and images of themselves, which impact their self-identities and self-esteem (McKee, 2000). McKee further suggested that when the media failed to present accessible images of gay men and the men were left with no access to an identity or a community, an intense feeling of isolation can be reinforced which is commonly associated with the experience many young gay men faced in the process of coming out (Troiden, 1989). It was reported that some subjects viewed those images to

have helped them discover an identity, improved their self-esteem and overcome loneliness. It also gave them an opportunity to identify with television characters that remind them of themselves (McKee, 2000). Interestingly, among all programs, McKee (2000) suggested that fictional programs as compared to non-fictional programs seemed to offer possibilities for identifications, in a sense that fictional programs offered gay males important information about gay identity to which they could relate and be able to feel part of a community. Equally important is that soap characters portray regular people, coming back every week, growing and changing over time, which facilitates the process of identification between the audience and the characters (McKee, 2000).

Uses & Gratification, Para-social and Identity Construction

Uses and gratification theories

Wright (1974) suggested that not only the "media serves various needs in society such as cultural continuity, social control, and for a large circulation of public information", but also that it was assumed that the audience would use the media in various ways such as a resource for self-identity formation (McQuail, 1997, p. 70). In support of Wright's assumption, Blumler (1979) found that the audience's motivations for watching a program were based, among other variables, on constructing or maintaining their personal identity. Blumler (1979) suggested that media content would give "added salience to something important in the audience member's own life, or situation" (p.17).

The active audience

Uses and gratifications theories contend that the audience is active in a sense that gratifications through media uses suggest that the audience can "form and reform on the basis of some media-related interest, needs, or preferences" (McQuail, 1997, p.30). Also part of the audience activity is the degree to which the audience is involved, which suggests that the more the audience is absorbed in the ongoing process of watching a program, the more the audience can be defined as involved. It can be referred to as "affective arousal or affective involvement" (McQuail, 1997, p.60). Affective involvement may lead to activity during and after watching a program, such as talking to the TV, or talking about the program with others, or deriving topics from the programs (Levy & Windahl, 1985). According to McQuail (1997) audience

activity can be seen in behaviors such as recording and re-watching programs. Levy and Windahl (1984) found that "the more the audience is active, the more, not only the audience perceives more gratification from their media use, but also [the audience is] more affected by such active and gratifying exposure to gratification" (p 74-75).

Communication needs and para-social interaction

Horton and Wohl (1956) were the first to introduce the concept of para-social interaction as "a seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer" (p.215). Para-social interaction, a one-sided mediated communication, can be imagined as bridging the gap or spatial distance between sender and receiver (McQuail, 1997). More importantly, Horton and Wohl (1956) indicated that para-social interaction might be the result of a lack of real social contacts.

Later, Norblund (1978) indicated that para-social interactions were a function of fulfilling some basic needs for communication or social interaction. Norblund (1978) also found that the viewer would come to know and to relate over time to the media figures in the same manner that viewers would come to know or relate to a friend in real life. It suggests, as well, that a possible use of para-social interaction would be understood as a substitute for companionship using media figures (Cole & Leets, 1999). For that very reason, Rubin and Perse (1987) redefined para-social interactions with TV characters as a form of affective interpersonal involvement. Such affective attachments with TV characters or personalities identified in para-social interactions are made possible with the use of specific media production artifacts and techniques that enhanced the fact that "viewers may react interpersonally to television personae and feel that they "know" the characters the way they know their friends" (Rubin & Perse, 1987, p.48).

Perse and Rubin (1989) also found in their study on attribution in social and para-social relationships that similar to real social relationships, para-social relationships with favorite soap opera characters were based to some extent "on reduction of uncertainty and ability to predict accurately the feeling and attitudes of the personae" (p.59). They based their study on the fact that "people and media are coequal communication alternatives that satisfy similar communication needs and provide similar gratifications" (Perse & Rubin, 1989, p.59).

Conway and Rubin (1991) added that based on attraction theories, people would feel less stress in relationships, in which they sense acceptance and affection. In this sense, para-social comfort should allow greater pleasure or program enjoyment (Conway & Rubin, 1991). This supported McKee's (2000) findings about his subjects reporting feelings of happiness and enjoyment after watching a program displaying positive images of gay characters.

In their study, Cole and Leets (1999) investigated the relationship between attachment style and involvement in para-social relationships with TV personalities. As attachment theories suggest that people develop either secure or insecure attachment, Cole and Leets (1999) found that attachment style was positively related to how people engaged in para-social relation with TV characters. Overall, Cole and Leets' (1999) findings validated the results of other studies such as Horton and Wohl (1956) and Tsao (1996), who suggested that anxious-ambivalent and certain secure individuals may engage in para-social relations with TV screen figures in order to fulfill unmeet relational needs. Both studies, Cohen (1997) and Cole and Leets (1999), found that "para-social interaction played a compensatory role in the lives of anxious attached people" (p.507). This is an interesting finding about anxious men, considering that a common factor among young gay males facing isolation and social repression is to develop anxiety.

Identity construction and Para-social interaction and identification

In the field of para-social relationships, no specific studies have focused exclusively on para-social relations as an alternative way for the viewers to construct identities. However, Noble (1975) found out in his study, looking at children interacting with certain types of TV programs, that children were involved to different degrees with the screen characters, or personalities. Moreover, "when viewers had a very positive attachment to a particular media figure but did not lose a sense of reality, the experience could contribute positively to the formation of one's own identity" (McQuail, 1997, p.199). According to Noble (1975) such a phenomenon is possible in a sense that those screen characters with whom children interact and identify on a regular basis become some kind of an extended kin grouping, with whom they could also develop their identity.

Another type of findings that might be of interest in identity construction, and is part of para-social relationships, is identification to screen characters. Concerning identification processes, Cohen (2001) found that the ability to identify with media characters was important because it offered the link between "media images" and "self-identity" (p. 246). Cohen (2001) suggested that "identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other and that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification" (p. 247). According to Cohen (1997) and Cole and Leets (1999), identifying with media figures or characters is based on a psychological attachment, which occurs between the viewer and the character, with whom the viewer is identifying. In that regard, Cohen (2001) added that in such processes the audience engages in different level of identification with the media characters such as being like, or wanting to be like the characters.

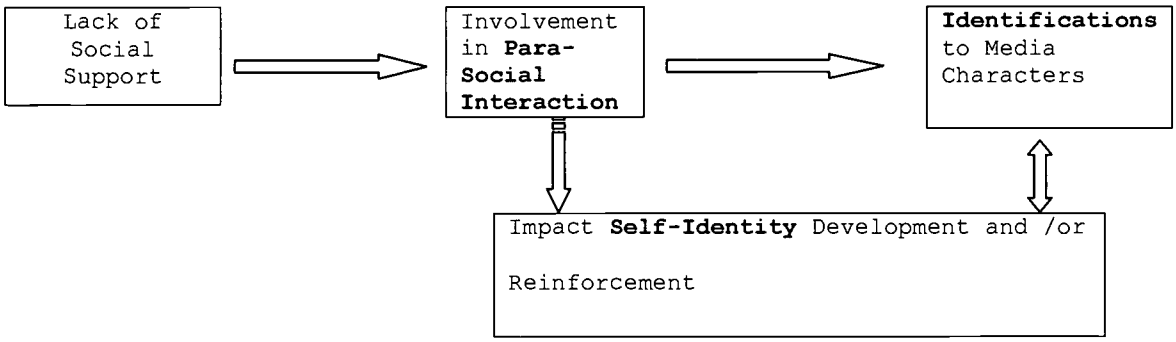
Theory And Hypothesis

According to Saulnier (1990), gay males who are facing a homophobic and/or heterosexist environment, differ in their identity construction and achievement as compared to their heterosexual male counterparts. This is based on the fact that gay males perceive, in general, less social support and have limited access to role models, with which they can identify. According to Erickson (1963, 1968), social support and identification are both key elements toward an achieve self-identity construction. Therefore, Saulnier (1990) suggested, that because of those lacks, gay males needed to find alternative ways to achieve a positive self-identity such as, for example, using the media as an emotional outlet to help them to reinforce or develop their self identity (McKee, 2000).

This confirms, on the communication side, earlier findings, particularly in the tradition of uses and gratification, in which theorists such as Blumler (1979) or McGuire (1974) found that the media could be used among other purposes to reinforce or develop one's personal identity or group identity. Moreover, as McKee (2000) discovered, in terms of identity development or reinforcement, that gay males had a preference for fictional genre and specifically drama genre, because it allows them to relate better on an emotional level to the storylines and the characters.
Such affective involvement with their media characters is observable through para-social interactions while gay males are engaged in watching the program they actively

selected. Then, the audience is able, over time, to develop strong emotional bonds with the characters, with which they can interact and identify, based on a common set of characteristics that the viewer is sharing with the character such as similar physical or personality traits, similar personal history, professional occupations or interests (Cohen,1997).

Based on previous findings in the domain of social psychology and communication, and based on the assumptions that were raised about identity formation among gay males that may impact the way they use and find gratification from the media, the following theoretical model is proposed.



Based on previous findings exposed in the literature review, in the domain of social psychology and uses and gratification, the following five hypotheses were tested in that study, in order to understand how affective involvement, and so-called para-social interactions, can contribute to identity formation among gay males.

H1 gay males are positively involved in para-social relationships.

H2 there is a positive relationship between para-social involvement and identification with favorite characters.

H3 there is a positive relationship between para-social involvement and interest in the favorite character.

H4 there is a positive relationship between para-social involvement and group identification and interaction.

H5 there is a positive relationship between para-social involvement and the development or reinforcement of the viewer self-identity.

Methodology

This study was based on a qualitative method, which draws its results from a representative group of 17 gay males who were randomly recruited in the Island of

Oahu, Hawaii, through The Honolulu Gay and Lesbian Cultural Center mailing list, The University of Hawaii Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered mailing list, the Diamond Head Unity Church Support Group and the Honolulu Gay Male Support group. The Ethnicities represented in that small group were: Caucasians, African American, mixed Hawaiian-Asian or Hawaiian-Caucasian-Hispanic, and Asian or mixed Asian.

As this study focused on how the gay male minority was using the content and images of the *Queer as Folk's* TV drama; three criteria were used to recruit subjects: all subjects needed to self-define themselves as gay males; subjects needed to be aged between 20 and 40 years old, and finally, they needed to watch the show on a regular basis. The material used for this study was a questionnaire inspired from a pre-existing Para-social Interaction and Identification Scale PSI Auter and Palmgreen (2000), which measured para- social interaction between the subject and their favorite characters.

Before engaging in the study, participant received an informed consent, which explained to them that they would participate in a questionnaire investigating how they related to the *Queer as Folk* original series. Data were recorded, for each answer provided by the subject, by taking notes during the interview process. The investigator transcribed each answer given by the subjects and those transcribed answers were later used in the results section to support each hypothesis. Each participant started the interview by answering a set of demographic questions, which were concerned with personal background in order to understand more general experiences about being gay. The other three sets of questions were especially focusing on how the viewers were relating to the show and particularly to their favorite characters. The last set of questions was more related to how the show impacted the viewers' identities.

Discussion & Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to investigate how gay males selected *Queer as Folk* for its content [as a psychological origin of media use], which they could easily relate to. Participants became affectively involved with their favorite characters and other characters on the show through para-social interactions and identifications in order to compensate for an inherent lack of social support or interaction in their lives. The results obtained through the interviews supported the five hypotheses, which tested different levels of engagement among gay males in terms of para-social interaction and identification to their favorite character(s) in *Queer as Folk*. The results were organized according to the five hypotheses cited at the end of the literature review.

Demographic

Age and Profession

Among the 17 subjects coming from various ethnical backgrounds, most males were in their twenties and early thirties. Most males, who were interviewed, were professionals working in various areas, such as social work, medical field, travel industry, priesthood, Entertainment, retail industry and food and beverage. Only very few students participated in the study, and most of them were working to support themselves.

Coming out experience

Most of the participants came out to their families in their twenties. Only few participants came out to their parents either at a very early age or in their thirties. Three participants chose to refrain from coming out to their parents and think that they never will. Almost all participants who came out to their parents reported coming out to their mother first, followed by the rest of their family. Few reported coming out first to their siblings, but not yet to their parents. Most participants agreed that the experience of coming out to their families created an intense emotional reaction, sometimes joyful, sometimes painful, but always including a fluctuating period of adjustments. During this period, families and participants had to re-evaluate expectations about marriage and raising a family. However, no matter how difficult the coming out experience proved to be, all participants who came out, were glad they did, not only because they could not stand lying to their family

anymore, but also because it had helped them to accept their homosexual identities better and reported that they felt relief.

This matched the earlier results found in Peacock's (2000) study in which he contends that a fulfilling adult development can only be achieved once a gay person accepts his identity through the process of coming out to important people in one's life. Only one male, subject (10), reported that his parents responded by completely withdrawing themselves from his life. Not surprisingly, the same subject strongly identified with Brian, who is the one character that did not come out to his father before his death and who suffered from a very dysfunctional and unhappy childhood within an unsupportive and uncaring family unit. Brian's character is highly unstable, aggressive, uncaring and believes that the concept of love is for 'straight' couples. Subject (10)'s personal history was very similar to aspects of Brian's character.

> […] I came out at 21 to my family. They never accepted it, and we don't talk anymore. My mom cannot understand the sex part of my lifestyle.

Subject (10) as well as others in the study, for which the parents became more accepting but not really supportive of their son's lifestyles, are typical examples of Saulnier's (1990) findings, which highlight that in general, gay males received less social support from their family and friends (beside gay friends) than their heterosexual counterparts. This was mostly due to the fact that some families or straight friends were concerned with reactions of others and how others would view them having a gay son or being with a gay person (Saulnier, 1990; Flowers & Buston, 2000). Many subjects divulged during the interview process their wish to have had a mother like Debby, who on the show is an activist and is very open about her son's sexuality.

In terms of relationships with their fathers, most males reported difficult or non-existent relationships. A few males reported that they never knew or just discovered who their biological father was or that their father was absent or in complete denial of their son's sexual orientation.

A few males reported going through a very intense phase of unhappiness and withdrawal during their childhoods; most related to a family crisis that included the loss of a parent or trouble in the parental relationship. While talking about his similarities with Brian's character, subject (4) shared that:

> I am very much emotionally unavailable, and I can be bitter cold as he is. I also share the same kind of unhappiness that when I was a kid. I remember when I was about 12, I spent almost a year not talking to anyone. I was going home and I would stay locked up in my room. I was very sad and unhappy [...]

Most interviewees reported growing up in a very conservative and sometimes very religious environment, which made the process of coming out a challenge. Almost all participants recalled hiding their homosexual desires and feelings, particularly at school, while growing up. Most participants reported dating girls throughout high school, sometimes becoming engaged and in one instance marrying a female. They did so primarily to avoid troubles at school, which sometimes occurred anyway, such as being called names or sometimes being brutalized by other students. Many males also reported that school was a totally unsupportive environment, and all males could relate to Justin's experience of coming out while still in high school. They could also understand and relate to Justin's gay bashing experience perpetrated by one of his classmates.

The demographic part of the questionnaire helped to confirm an inherent lack of social support among gay males, which impacted their identity construction, and eventually influenced the way they used the media. As a result, many males, based on their personal history, identified with Brian's character, which received minimal social support from his family and was the most emotionally unavailable, aggressive, uncaring, and independent character in the entire cast.

Queer as Folk viewing habits

All 17 participants watched the entire first season. Most subjects watch the show every week at home or in a social setting, including friends' houses or bars. Few participants reported recording the show if they could not watch it.

Media images before *Queer as Folk*

All participants, irrespective of their age group, noted that their first impressions or images of homosexuality stemmed from personal experiences; not from the media. Most interviewees, particularly older male participants, recalled only a few images from TV due to the scarcity of gay content on television. Some other participants grew up in a religious, conservative environment, which prevented them from getting much

information on homosexuality. This supports McKee's (2000) findings, which reported that most subjects recalled very few images of gay characters or gay content on TV. Only a few males remembered particularly negative content including news stories about AIDS in the 1980's and very brief images spotlighting the New Orleans' Mardi Gras Carnival or Gay Pride marches; mostly portraying effeminate men to whom they could not identify. Only few males remembered images from TV commercials and TV series such as Billy Crystal's "Soap," "All my Children," or more recently, "Will & Grace." However, most participants remembered movie images such as *Not my Child, Making Love, Life Time Companion, The Bird Cage, The Adventure of Priscilla Queen of the Desert, Beautiful Things, Get Real, The Living End, Torch Song Trilogy, Pillow Book, The Closet, Ma vie en Rose, Madonna Truth or Dare,* and *The Broken Heart's Club.*

Queer as Folk's favorite characters

Five participants exclusively identified Brian as their favorite character. Three participants identified Michael as their favorite character, and only two participants strictly identified Ted and Emmet and as their favorite characters. Four participants identified principally with one favorite character - including Brian, Michael, and Ted. Two of the four participants identified with Brian. Those participants, however, were also fond of a second character- including Emmet, Justin, and Melanie and Lindsay as a couple; two preferred Justin's character.
Two participants did not identify with any specific favorite character(s), but did identify with at least two characters, which were mostly Brian, Justin and Emmet. The majority of interviewees selected Brian Kinney as their favorite or second choice character. In the show, Brian Kinney is the most sexually aggressive, the most controversial, independent minded, professionally successful, straightforward, unapologetic, uncaring, and emotionally distant and unavailable.

It is interesting to note that most participants live away from their families in order to be able to express themselves and their sexuality. Many of the males in this situation exhibited a high level of independence like Brian or other characters who also exhibited very independent personality traits. This belief prompted gay males to exhibit more independent personalities because they sought more internal judgments

to support their belief and values (Saulnier, 1990), as opposed to heterosexuals, who depended more often on external judgments (based on social interactions).

Queer as Folk characters vs. TV gay characters

In general, participants reported that: First *Queer as Folk* was a drama as compared to the typical situational comedy so that the characters were more three-dimensional. Second, *Queer as Folk'* characters are seen in loving or sexual relationships with other gay characters as compare to other series such as *Spin City, Sex in the City or Will & Grace* where the gay characters are rarely shown in a same sex relationship and mostly involved in a straight environment. Fourth, many interviewees also reported that their favorite character(s) broke the effeminate man stereotype, beside Emmet's character, who happened to be effeminate. Fifth, the characters are perceived as real because nothing about their lives is hidden.

Hypothesis One

The first hypothesis was concerned with knowing whether or not gay males were positively engaged in para-social interactions and identifications. Para-social interaction is understood, in the context of this study, as a form of affective interpersonal involvement with TV characters (Rubin & Perse, 1987). Such interpersonal involvement may lead the viewer to feel that they know the TV character as they would know their own friends (Rubin & Perse, 1987). Identification in the context of this study is defined as common points between the viewer and the character such as affinity, similarity, or wanting to be like the favorite character (Cohen, 1997), or imagining oneself as the favorite character (Livingstone, 1998). The answers given throughout the interviews have shown a positive correlation between involvement in the show (seeing the show on a regular basis, or even recording the show) and the development of an affective attachment to the participants' favorite character(s). Such results match earlier findings regarding uses and gratification, which defined audience activity through their involvement and selection of programs. According to McQuail (1997), audience activity in relation to involvement is seen in behaviors such as recording and re-watching the programs.

Furthermore, McQuail (1997) suggested that the more the audience is absorbed in watching a program, the more the audience can be defined as involved. It is referred to as "affective arousal or affective involvement" (McQuail, 1997, p.60). Affective

arousal involvement may lead to activities during the viewing of a program, that include talking to the TV, talking about the program with others, or deriving topics from the programs (Levy & Windahl, 1985). Such affective attachment has been defined as para-social interaction and identification (Rubin & Perse, 1987). Examples will be given throughout the results section.

Hypothesis Two

The second hypothesis, H2, was designed to measure a positive relationship between para-social involvement and identification with favorite characters. The second hypothesis was validated by the fact that all 17 males identified with at least one favorite character(s). Cohen (1997), and Cole and Leets (1999) previously defined this kind of identification as a psychological attachment that viewers developed with their favorite character(s).

Most participants, who identified strictly to one characters, reported that the character reminded them of themselves because of common personality characteristics or physical traits, common experiences in life or same professional occupations. As Cohen (2001) suggested, identification in media studies has often been understood as a "feeling of affinity, friendship, similarity, and linking of media characters or imitation of a character by audience members" (p. 249). For example subject (5) reported that:

> Yeah, Brian totally reminds me of myself. I can relate to his un-attachment to love […]

Interviewees either shared common problems, qualities, attitudes, and beliefs with their favorite character(s), or would have liked to share those traits with their their favorite character(s). Participants' answers reflected earlier findings from Liebes and Katz (1990), who noticed three types of variation of identifications to media characters, which were also seen in the way subjects identified to their favorite character(s). Liebes and Katz (1990) found that viewers often reported reactions toward characters, including liking, being similar, or wanting to be similar to characters that they identified with.

Subject (2) mentioned having problems similar to his favorite character, Brian:

> Yeah I can have sex just for the fun of it and not care about people, both about people's opinions and about sentiments of people I had sex with. This was just casual sex.

Subject (17) shared his desire to have more of Brian's attitudes and beliefs:

> I think, I really appreciate Brian's attitude, and would like to be more like that. He doesn't take shit from anybody, and really would like that, not caring about people opinions straight, gay, doesn't matter. He just lives his life.

Subjects who identified with two or more characters recognized pieces of themselves in several characters on the show. Subject (14) could not limit his identification to one or two specific characters, but rather, identified with several. This is what he reported:

> I don't have one specific character that I like but more a bit of several characters. I like Justin, Brian and […] Emmet's attitude, and I like Brian because I am very much no bullshit.

The degree to which some of the participants were able to identify was noticeable through the use of strong language, which described levels of identification. Cohen (2001) commented that "the varying intensity of identification reflects the extent to which one exchanges his or her own perspective for that of another and his ability to forget him or herself" (p. 248). Subject (1) used strong language, including the word "mirror," to describe the extent to which he imagined himself as the character, Brian.

> Oh yeah! Definitively, seeing Brian, it's like looking at me in the mirror […]

On the other hand, some males identified in a more moderate manner: for example, when interviewees could relate only to part of their favorite character(s) personality. For example subject (7) could not share all attitudes and belief with his favorite character Ted:

> Humm! Yes and no, because Ted has that tendency of being pessimistic, while I am a very optimistic person […] He is keeping things inside not to burden people that he loves, and I do that a lot.

The overall ability of subjects to identify with characters on the show is very important in terms of the development, maintenance, and reinforcement of their self-identity. According to Erickson (1968) and Mead (1974), the strong ability to identify with people and other important figures in one's life is a crucial skill in the development or maintenance of self-identity and socialization. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that the show possibly impacted the interviewees' identity. Particularly since earlier findings (Levy & Windahl, 1984) argued that " the more the audience is active [which is the case in that study as participants select the program for its content], the more, not only the audience perceive more gratification from media use, but also they are more affected by such active gratifying exposure" (pp.74-75).

Hypothesis Three

The third hypothesis, H3, measured if there was a positive relationship between para-social involvement and interest in the favorite character. The third hypothesis was supported. The three first questions of that set showed interesting results considering the time and space constraint between Hawaii and the mainland. Those questions measured the interest of the participants in their favorite character(s) beyond the scope of the show.

For example, subjects were asked if they attended any of Showtime's promotional events on the mainland in order to meet with their favorite character(s). Four subjects (1, 10, 11, 6) actually attended some of the *Queer as Folk's* promotional events. It was interesting to see that the participants' interest in their favorite character(s) outside of the show was strong enough to motivate them to travel from Hawaii to the mainland. In the same manner, a few subjects try to engage in the *Queer as Folk's* online discussions, even though, the hour difference between Hawaii and the East Coast made it very difficult to do so. Most participants went to the gay press (*Advocate, XY, Out)* or gay websites such as *Gay.com* or *Gay wired,* and read either critiques about the show or feature stories about their favorite character(s) and other characters on the show.

The rest of the questions were related to the interest in their favorite character(s). The questions accurately measured the relationship between para-social involvement and interest in the favorite character(s). For example, most males, 15 out

of 17, could predict what their favorite character(s) would do or how their favorite character(s) would react in specific situations. Most of those males explained that their predictions were based on their knowledge of the characters, which developed as they watched the show over time or based on what they would have done in the same situation. Below is an example:

> Subject (9): Yeah I can predict his reaction or embarrassment when some cute guys come up to him at the club […] I think I can relate to that, because I can be shy like that, or be uncomfortable in those situations because I can't believe it is happening.

Most participants also agreed that they cared about what happened to their favorite character(s) and other characters on the show depending on how they related to the characters and the situation.

> Subject (3): Yeah, I do care, particularly I was wondering how Brian would emotionally go through Justin's bashing, because the first season ends with that image of Brian sitting down at the hospital, with that devastated look on his face […]

The last set of questions simply asked the subjects if they liked their favorite character(s) voice. Some subjects were indifferent; accepting that the voice was just a part of the character. Most interviewees said that their favorite character(s) voice was attractive or sexy or liked the voice because it was masculine, which was different from the stereotypical effeminate "queen voice."

Overall, the study demonstrates that subjects used the same psychological constructs that they would have used in real social relationships such as attachment style (Cole & Leets, 1999) or reduction of uncertainty, to predict the reaction of their favorite character(s) on the show, as they would with friends or family. Perse and Rubin (1989) further suggested that para-social relationships were similar to real social relationships (Norblund, 1978; Koeing & Lessan, 1985). Perse and Rubin (1989) also suggested that certain production techniques might help to evoke emotional reactions and attachments that mimicked the ways people developed emotional reactions or attachments in real social interactions.

Hypothesis Four

The fourth hypothesis measured the relationship between para-social involvement and group identification and interaction. The participants' answers to this set of questions showed a positive relationship between para-social involvement and both group identification and interaction. Therefore, the fourth hypothesis was supported.

When the participants were asked if the show made them feel part of a gay community, 14 out of 17 subjects answered affirmatively for a variety of reasons, which include:

First, subjects (9, 4, 1) watched the show in a gay social setting, with friends, or at the bar in order to feel part of a community; sharing with others same emotional reactions to the stories. Subject (10) talked about his experience as follows:

> Yes I do, mostly because I watch the show in a gay environment, since I watch it at the bar, and I can tell by the people's reactions that surround me that we share something in common from the show. The show is some kind of a common bond for all of us. It refers to our culture […]

Second, participants (2, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12) believed that since the show was about gay life, they related to that lifestyle and that they felt more part of gay culture and a gay community. Watching the show was a validating experience because they related to most of the content. One couple, subjects (10) and (11), shared that:

> Subject (10): Yes I think so, just because everybody can relate to the stories, or the characters. It's relatively representative of our life, the sex, the party, the friendship, and all that.
>
> Subject (11): Yes, I can find myself in that […] we have the same kind of lifestyle, the same circle of friends, and we go out all together or we see each other all the time.

Mead (1934), Erickson (1968) and Meyrowitz (1994) expound on group identification and suggest that identifying with groups is not only crucial for the development or reinforcement of one's self-identity and social identity, but also provides the individual with a feeling of belonging; a major problem among gay males. Such remarks validated earlier findings about uses and gratification and the fact that media use facilitated or eased social interactions (Blumler, 1979). For example,

participants (9, 4, 1) also felt more a part of the community because the show's storyline was a frequent topic of conversations or social facilitator for them.

On the other hand, some older participants (13, 16, 17), who did not believe that the show increased their sense of feeling part of the gay community, also reported to have a long history in the gay community, either because they came out at an early age or because they were already highly involved as activists.

In general, the ability for those men to bond with a mediated gay community highlights the common gay experience of growing up in a straight family, experiencing isolation before coming out, and embracing a new family - the family of gay friends.

Concerning the question that asked whether participants could identify similarities between interactions with their friends and interactions between characters that they viewed on the show, all participants (1-17) reported that their interactions with their friends were exactly the same as those portrayed on the show, including usage of same language, humor, sarcasm and also similar activities such as talking on the phone, going to restaurants, bars and clubs with their friends. One participant, subject (12), also thought that his friends were like a family, but a family that he chose. The characters and their interactions on the show reminded him of that.

> Very similar […] I can relate to that because we are a very tight group of friends that I can rely on, like a family. We do lots of things together like hanging out at friends place, going to the bar and things like that, and always joking around and being cynical.

The same question was asked in relation to participants' interactions with their families, and if they had similar interactions as compared to those that the characters have with their families on the show. A significant number of participants were able to compare their relationships with their families, with the relationship of at least one character and his family. Subjects (14, 8, 6, 13, 16, 1, 4) related to Justin's relationship with his parents, subjects (15, 2, 12, 17, 7) related to Michael and his mother, and subjects (5, 6) related to Brian and his parents.

The demographic questions were very helpful in determining how participants perceived the relationships on screen in comparison to the relationships with their families. For example, subjects who compared their relationships with their mother to

Justin's relationship with his mother, Jennifer, were subjects who reported growing up in a fairly conservative environment and a period when their parents had to adjust to their son's sexual orientation. Those subjects also added that their parents were relatively accepting and understanding, and their mothers were often described as loving individuals. Justin's mother definitely fits the previous comment and she, eventually, accepted him and tried to know more about his gay community. Subject (4) commented that:

> The closest relationship would be the one of Justin and his mom. My mom is trying to understand me, and she is doing fine now. She is accepting, but I certainly don't have a relationship like Mike has with his mom […]

Those subjects, who identified more with Michael and his relationship with his mother, did so mainly because their own relationships with their mothers were extremely loving, quite open about sexuality and very supportive. Debby, Michael's mother, is depicted as an incredibly open minded and caring individual. She is also portrayed as a great activist in the community.

> Subject (7): Yeah! Absolutely, I can think of my mom as Debby. She is not an activist like Debby in the show, but she is the popular mom. Everybody likes my mom. She is always taking care of my friends […]

The only two subjects who referred to Brian's relationship with his parents related more specifically to Brian's very difficult relationship with his father before his death. These subjects shared a similar kind of relationship, marked by difficulties with their fathers.

> Subject (5): Well yeah, as I said, I can relate to Brian's difficult relationship with his dad. Basically, my sexuality is taboo, I never talk about that with my dad, but he supports me in other things […]

It's reasonable to conclude that more males were probably able to relate to Brian's relationship with this father, because many participants cited situations from the show, particularly the death of Brian's father, throughout the course of the interview. Also, it was obvious that, answering that question, all males systematically referred to their relationship with their mothers but they very rarely referred to their relationship with their fathers. The show also emphasized on the importance of the mother-son relationship among gay males.

All males unanimously answered that they saw most of their friends in characters portrayed on the show. Their explanations were very specific:

> Subject (16): Oh Yeah, I can think of my friends as most of the characters in the show, not physical traits but personality wise. My best friend, as I said, he is like Brian and my assistant at work is like Michael's boyfriend "Ben."

Participants were also asked if they ever interacted with their favorite character(s) in ways similar to their interactions with friends or family. All 17 participants said that they had such interactions, which were expressed through joyful demonstrations that included clapping or interjections to warn or to congratulate characters in specific situations. The following examples were provided.

> Subject (1): Oh Yeah! […] For example, during the first season, I was telling Justin, 'Yeah! go for it boy'; when he jumped on stage and decided that he was going to participate in the 'King of Babylon' […]
>
> Subject (6): Oh, Yeah I do that all the time. For example, I was clapping in my hands when Brian glued the judge to the restroom seat.

Hypothesis Five

The fifth hypothesis tested whether a positive relationship existed between para-social interaction and self-identity development or reinforcement. The fifth hypothesis was supported. It is significant to note that the first two questions in that set were difficult to answer, and almost always required participants to pause before formulating their answers. Although it was obvious that the show impacted those participants because they related so well to the content and characters, a few males did not believe that the show impacted their identity. However, it is possible that because their answers were less spontaneous in this instance, and because identity construction or reinforcement is not always conscious, some of those males may not have been aware of the impact the show may have had on their identity. For example, I noticed that participants who identified with Brian often wore the same bracelet Brian donned on the show.

When participants were asked if some of those characters on the show could be role models, most participants could not identify any. Some subjects explained that since they were adults now, viewing those characters as role models did not appeal to

them anymore and also they considered themselves as equal to the characters, which made identification to them easier. The majority of McKey's (2000) subjects also express their desire to see more regular, everyday types of people with masculine traits, with whom they could identify. Hoffner and Cantor (1991) also suggested that viewers had a natural desire to see characters similar to them.

Only three males identified role models from the show based on qualities and accomplishments that inspired them.

> Subject (4): Michael can be a role model to me, because of his exceptional relationship with his mom, and also because it's almost like he cares more about his friends more than about himself, and that really inspires me because he is not afraid to show his emotion, some thing that I have to work on.

The second question asked participants if the show had any impact on their identities. Only one male, subject (7), thought that the show had no impact on his identity because as an older man, he had already done a lot of work on his identity. He did concede that the show probably reinforced things that he already had inside of him. According to McGuire (1974), identity reinforcement occurs when individuals strive to reinforce what they personally appreciate and value through mass communication offerings. Blumler (1979) reinforced McGuire's (1974) findings when he noted that audiences were motivated to watch programs based, among other variables, on constructing or maintaining their personal identities.

Otherwise, 16 out of 17 males agreed that the show definitely impacted their identity; although it was sometimes difficult to determine exactly what was affected. Most believed that the show helped them to be more accepting of who they were and made the experience of being gay "not such a big deal" and also that the show boosted their self-esteem. Those findings matched McKee's (2000) comments, reveling that his subjects felt better about themselves after watching a movie or a TV series that displayed positive gay content to which they could easily relate. For example, subject (3) also shared that:

> Yeah, I don't know exactly to what level, but I just feel good when I watch the show, and it helps me to accept myself better, and say, I am gay, it's OK.

It was also beneficial to see themselves, for the first time, in characters on TV programs.

> Subject (6): Yeah, I think so because it is the first time I can really relate to what I see on TV, and it makes me take a good look at my lifestyle, and I think I feel good about it.

Conway and Rubin (1991) noted, based on attraction theories, that people feel less stress and are happier in mediated relationships that provide acceptance and affection. Apparently, the show provides participants with these kinds of relationships, particularly with their favorite character(s) or supporting characters.

The last question asked participants if they would subscribe to a channel that only offered gay oriented programming. The justification for posing this question was to evaluate how much participants were in need of contents and images that represented the gay community. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive, and comments such as "Absolutely, it should be supported" (subject 5), or "Canada already has a gay channel, that's about time that we get one too" (subject 6), were common. When McKee (2000) asked his subjects if they would watch any program that displayed gay characters, the answers provided to him were also overwhelmingly positive. Responses included: "Oh absolutely, anything" (McKee, 2000, p. 88).

This study established a positive relationship between para-social involvements as a way to compensate for an inherent lack of social support and identity construction or reinforcement. Thus, this study showed a positive link between psychosocial theory of identity development among gay males in comparison to heterosexual males, and how such findings might explain the reason why gay males have developed strong para-social involvement with their favorite characters, as a way to continue to feed the process of identity construction in this minority, which is known for lacking social support.

Limitations and Recommendations

Two limitations emerged in this study, which were, first, that the results were based on a small population, which could make the generalization of the results to the entire community difficult and, second, that measuring self-identity construction through para-social interaction could be challenging as identity construction is a complex process, not always done on a conscious level.

Concerning recommendations for future research, it will also be interesting to investigate how differently gay and lesbians might engage in para-social interaction and identification, while watching the same show, or even, to a greater extent how minorities in general might use the media to compensate for lack of social support. Are lesbian women facing the same challenges in self-identity construction as gay males? Does this impact their psychological motives in media use? Would they engage in para-social interaction and identification to compensate for an earlier lack of social support?

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Appendix A

The following questions are concerned with participants' favorite characters from the Queer as Folk show and the show's cast in general.

The following questions are concerned with participants 'demographics:

1) How old are you?
2) What is your profession?
3) Have you come out? If yes when?
4) How often do you watch the show?
5) Please, name you favorite character(s), from the Queer as Folk's program.
6) In general, where do your images of gay men come from? *
7) How similar or different is your favorite character(s) in "Queer as Folk's", from other gay characters on TV so far? Give examples.

The following questions are concerned with how participants identify with his/her favorite characters from the show.

8) Does your favorite character remind you of yourself? Give examples.
9) Can you imagine yourself as your favorite character? Why?
10) Do you happen to have the same problems as your favorite characters have? Give examples.
11) Do you think that you share the same qualities as your favorite characters? Give examples.
12) What do you appreciate most about your favorite character(s) in terms of his or her attitudes, beliefs? How does this relate to you?
13) Can you identify with your favorite characters? Give examples.

The following questions are concerned with participants' interest in his/her favorite characters

14) Have you been to any Queer as Folk's promotional event, to meet your FAV? Give examples.
15) Have you been chatting with your favorite characters or other Queer as Folk's cast member on the Queer as Folk's underline the show web site?

16) Have you been watching other programs starring your favorite characters? Give examples.

17) Have you been reading articles or critics about your favorite characters?

18) Do you try sometimes to predict what your favorite characters will do in certain situation? How does that relate to you?

19) Do you care about what happens to your FAV favorite characters in specific situations? Give examples, and how does that relate to you?

20) Do you like hearing the voice of your FAV? Why is that?

The following questions are concerned with how participants identify him/her self as part of the group.

21) Do you feel when you were watching "Queer as Folk's", you became part of the gay community?

22) Describe how similar the interactions between the characters in "Queer as Folk's" might be to interactions that you might have with your friends?

23) Are the CHARS characters' interactions similar to interactions between you and your family?

24) Do you think your friends are like the Queer as Folk's CHARS characters?

25) While you were watching the show, did you ever interact with your favorite character(s) like you would with your friends or family? Give an example.

26) In general, can you relate to the CHARS characters' attitudes and or beliefs in the show? Give examples.

Appendix B

The following questions are concerned with the participants' general comments about the show

27) Do you think that some of those favorite character(s) that you have in this show, might serve as role model for you? If yes, why?

28) Do you believe this show has had an impact on your self-identity? If yes, how?

29) If a channel offered you exclusively gay oriented programming, would you join the membership?

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