

**MEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS: A COMPARISON OF
MAJOR FORMS AND MODEL FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

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MEDIATED AND UNMEDIATED RELATIONSHIPS

As technology continues to advance and the proliferation of media proceeds to saturate our society and our individual lives, modern Americans are finding themselves increasingly engaged in media-enabled interactions. On average, we spend over 60 hours at our computers every month¹ and nearly 5 hours a day² watching television, representing roughly 28% of our lives. With so much of our time devoted to these two media, it is not surprising that they have become a source of academic attention. Media ecology is a school of thought that considers media in terms of their impacts upon society; interpersonal communication addresses media as tools of individual interaction. These two areas of study monitor the same subject from the global-technological and discreet-personal perspectives, respectively, but there is only incidental reference in each to the other within the literature of each field, perhaps due to what Denis McQuail refers to as an “interdisciplinary dispute between sociology and psychology over the relative validity of collective and individual explanations of social phenomena” (McQuail 1985, 150).

In an attempt to bridge these two fields, this thesis examines interactions facilitated by television and computers, shown recently by the Council for Research Excellence to be the dominant media of the day³ (Stelter 2009), through the lenses of media ecology and interpersonal communication. This thesis explores how theorists of these schools of thought have addressed the types of relationships viewers develop

¹ Nielsen Online February 2009 Average PC Usage 60h :11m: 56s

² Nielsen Media Research 2007-2008 Broadcast Season Average Daily Television Usage among Persons 2+ 4h: 39m

³ This study showed similar results for “screen time” as the Nielsen figures cited earlier – the average adult uses screen-based media (e.g. television, computer, cell phone) for about 8.5 hours each day.

with television personalities and the types of relationships that exist between users of computer-mediated communications (CMC)⁴, and then compares these mediated relationships to each other and to traditional, unmediated relationships. This comparison will consider a number of elements which contribute to the structures of relationships, including convenience, consistency, a shared sense of identity or purpose, strong and enduring emotional bonds, and social control. To support this comparison, a new model will be proposed as a means to describe the primary points of difference and similarity between types of mediated and unmediated interactions.

In order to focus this thesis, its scope has been restricted to exclude particular variables that, while worthy of study, may needlessly complicate the work. For our purposes, we will focus on mediated relationships that are either wholly or primarily mediated. A wholly mediated relationship would be one in which there is never a face-to-face (F2F) interaction, nor is one intended to occur at any time. A relationship would be considered primarily mediated in nature when there is only unique or rare physical interaction between communicative partners, such as a fan seeing a television personality on the street or computer-mediated communicators meeting at a party.

This work will concentrate on the impact of mediated communication on adults, excluding the study of minors – persons under the age of 18 – for who developmental concerns supersede those of mediated versus unmediated communication. Also omitted from examination in what follows is the phenomenon of “cybersex,” a form of CMC in which physical intimacy is suggested, simulated, or described in detail. As any

⁴ For the purposes of this, and most papers using the term, CMC is restricted to text-based communications, excluding a variety of computer-based media that offer richer information environments, such as internet telephony (VOIP) and video chat.

findings relating to CMC in general can be applied to this specific use of the process, itself the topic of much writing (see Cade 1996; Daneback, Cooper, and Mansson 2005; Dryer and Lijtmaer 2007; Harton and Boedeker 2005; Ross 2005; Schwartz and Southern 2000; Waskul 2003; Waskul, Douglass, and Edgley 2000), it is not specifically addressed in this thesis. Finally, the phenomenon of interaction with artificial intelligence constructs online is not addressed in this thesis. The work begins with an exploration of the interactions we experience with television personalities and the relationships that develop as a result of these interactions.

Parasocial Interactions and Relationships

In 1956 Donald Horton and Richard Wohl coined the term “para-social” to describe the “seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer” (Horton and Wohl 1956, 1). While this relationship is not unique to television – the authors implicate radio and the movies in this paper, as well, and Horton went on to suggest in a later paper that parasocial interaction (PSI) exists between a speaker and a large audience (Horton and Strauss 1957, 580) – this is the medium in which the dynamic is most apparent. Television’s unique ability to compel this reaction from viewers is due to a combination of traits inherent to the technology and techniques studied and developed by producers over time.

Technologically, television is a medium of plentitude, capable of delivering a simulacrum of life, often in synchrony with a live performance. The wonder of being able to see something happening hundreds of miles away in real time, as it occurred,

was a compelling force for the acceptance and proliferation of television. It was this sense of “liveness” that initially differentiated television from film. While filmed television was available via kinescope, “The poor quality of the reproduced picture was a serious defect (Sturcken 1990, 13). In William Boddy’s discussion of the merits of each, he notes that

According to many early writers on television, the essential technological feature of television versus the motion picture was the electronic medium’s capacity to convey a simultaneous distant performance visually. In this regard, the medium was a unique synthesis of the immediacy of the live theatrical performance, the space-conquering powers of radio, and the visual strategies of the motion picture (Boddy 1990, 80).

Producers of television have many means by which to evoke a sense of connection from their viewers, their primary aim being to locate the images and sounds on the screen within a viewer’s framework of knowledge – the world viewers know and expect it to be. Henry Perkinson refers to television as communicating analogically, defining this type of communication as “...carried out largely by means of body movements: tension of voluntary muscles, changes in facial expression, hesitation, shifts in tempo of speech or movement, or overtones of the voice and irregularities of respiration” (Perkinson 1991, 7). Horton and Wohl discuss how actors would address the camera directly when their characters were meant to be talking to others around them and how they might “duplicate the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering” (Horton and Wohl 1956, 4) in order to convey upon the viewer a sense of being in a casual conversation with those who “...with few

exceptions...are, or give the appearance of being, paragons of middle-class virtue with decently modest intellectual capacities" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 16).

In his exploration of literature addressing parasocial interaction (PSI), David Giles describes how "Soap characters frequently reminded viewers of people they knew" (Giles 2002, 280) and that "...social attraction (i.e., the media figure could be a friend) was a more important motivating factor...than physical attraction" (Giles 2002, 284). Horton and Wohl discuss how "...these devices are indulged in not only to lure the attention of the audience...but also to highlight...sociability, easy affability, friendship, and close contact – briefly, all the values associated with free access and easy participation in pleasant social interaction in primary groups" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 5). Shows like *Friends* found success by inviting viewers into the circle of friends represented on the series (Eyal and Cohen 2006).

These tools used to arouse intimacy were the state of the art in 1956, and were the starting point from which the manipulation of positioning, pacing, and flow have continued to be perfected. Intense audience research has honed producers' tools of emotional connection while technology has advanced and picture and sound have become more precise. Matthew Lombard and Theresa Ditton describe how high definition television technology creates "an enhanced sense of presence," suggesting that "mediated experiences that closely mimic nonmediated ones cause difficulties for the reality-monitoring process" (Lombard and Ditton 1997). As the image becomes clearer, the ability to differentiate blurs as use of close-ups and discussions in hushed voices add to a sense of intimacy with the images on screen.

In personal discussions regarding the topic, friends have been skeptical regarding the common occurrence of parasocial interaction, indicating beliefs that parasocial relationships are not “real,” they are one sided, and engagement parasocial relationships is inherently pathological. Their skepticism has been dispelled through a simple conversation which starts with my asking them about a television show they watch regularly, and then about why they watch it. One of the chief reasons is usually a character on the show. Using *Friends* as an example, people might mention that they enjoy Matthew Perry’s character “Chandler Bing.” When asked why they liked this character, they could relate stories about things he said, things he did, or ways in which they reacted to him. The proof of the parasocial relationship comes when I ask them to reflect on how they felt talking about Chandler, and how that feeling might compare to their talking about a real life friend. It is this similarity in emotional reflection that usually alleviates their hesitations regarding PSI.

For those that remain skeptical, there are several examples of interactions that, while not the norm for most viewers, represent interactions that reinforce PSI. When viewers call in to talk shows, like *Oprah*, they are, in fact, interacting in a two-sided conversation. Interactive television systems have existed for years, such as QUBE in the late 70s and early 80s (Cerulo, Ruane, and Chayko 1992, 121) and *Wink* in the 90s, allowing viewers to participate in polls or games using a remote control. Fan-produced content allows viewers to connect to producers regarding aspects of the show that resonate, using the “vocabulary” of the show.⁵ In order to successfully make this leap,

⁵ This content may be as rudimentary as fan fiction, stories written using the characters from a show, or as complex as mash-ups, digitally edited clips using material from a show to highlight facets important to

blurring the line between producer and consumer of the persona, it is necessary for the author to empathize with the characters he is re-presenting.

The ultimate feedback a television show receives is its Nielsen ratings, as a program that fails to draw enough viewers to support its production and the needs of its host network will not remain on the air. Joseph Conway and Alan Rubin illustrate the importance of parasocial interaction upon the success of a program, explaining, "Parasocial interaction helped explain most viewing motives...is a salient component of viewing intention and selection...may be more important for viewing intent and expectations than a program's content" (Conway and Rubin 1991, 458). Perkinson offers a similar observation, indicating that television's bias is towards relationships:

That is, whether we are watching a drama, a situation comedy, a game show, or the news, our attention is drawn primarily to the relationships among the people presented on the screen. We pay less attention to the content of the programs we watch than to the patterns of relationships expressed in how people interact with one another. (Perkinson 1991, 7)

While many factors influence viewers' decisions to watch a show, such as cinematography, genre, and editing, if they do not feel a connection to personae represented on the program they will not feel compelled to come back to the show.

While it is true that the majority of the interactions in a parasocial relationship are indirect, the producers of show (including the network representatives, writers, directors, performers, etc.) must be sensitive to the signals being sent to them through

the viewer/producer. As an example for this I recommend "CSI Miami - Endless Caruso One Liners" at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_sarYH0z948

these tools of response, as well as Nielsen ratings, correspondence and phone calls to the network, and reality show “voting,” taking into account the expressed needs of the audience. According to Karen Cerulo, Janet Ruane, and Mary Chayko, “Responding to audience feedback is a vital part of the bonding process” (Cerulo, et al. 1992, 123). Neil Postman explains how writers “write *for* people” and that their work “...now depends more than ever on the wishes of the audience, not the creativity of the artist” (Postman 1993, 136). This reciprocal need dispels, or at least dilutes, the argument that PSI is a unidirectional process in which the producers control the relationship and the audience is comprised of passive consumers.

These external, mediated forms of response are not all that is demanded from the viewer to establish a parasocial relationship. Rather, viewers must be active participants. “The faithful audience is one that can accept the gambit offered; and the functions of the program for this audience are served not by the mere perception of it, but by the role-enactment that completes it” (Horton and Wohl 1956, 7). In order to successfully experience the full benefit of the televisual experience, viewers must open up to the emotional and psychological interaction offered by the television persona.

A strong parasocial relationship will not be constrained to the time in which the persona is on the air. The subject of a PSI will linger in the mind of the viewer over time, resulting in reflection, gossip, and inspiration, among other things. According to Horton and Wohl, “The experience does not end with the program itself...it may be only after it has ended that it is submitted to intellectual analysis and integrated into...the self” (Horton and Wohl 1956, 9). By bringing the parasocial interaction away

from the screen and into their immediate world, viewers give these interactions the structure to build into relationships. Susanna Annese explains the complex and active mental processes to which viewers subject television content; "...they order information received by television through schemes or representations that allow them to appraise, select, complete, and reorganize the perceptive material" (Annese 2004, 374). When this reorganization is done with friends, the conversation takes on the tone of gossip, reinforcing the parasocial relationship (Harrington and Bielby 1995).

Hyperpersonal Interactions and Relationships

Computer-mediated communication might seem a fairly cold and impersonal means of interaction, especially when presented as pure text. Communicating through this medium strips away everything about an individual, leaving a message without a face, without a voice, without nonverbal information such as inflection and posture, and even without a proper name. And yet, users of the medium have made claims that friendships made through CMC have become their best friends, a phenomenon found by Reiko Ando and Akira Sakamoto (2008, 994), David Jacobson (1996, 467), Samantha Henderson and Michael Gilding (2004, 495), and Barry Wellman, Janet Salaff, Dimitrina Dimitrova, Laura Garton, Milena Gulia, and Caroline Haythornthwaite (1996, 221).

Lacking the social cues that are normally central to the establishment of a relationship, users of CMC have charted a course around this barrier in order to create a more rewarding experience online. The path of this course is similar to the plea of Susumu Tonegawa who, as described by Postman, felt that the English language was

better suited to scientific pursuits as "...the Japanese language does not foster clarity or effective understanding in scientific research" (Postman 1993, 124). Earlier, Postman explains "...that language is not merely a vehicle of expression, it is also the driver: and that what we perceive...is a function of our languaging processes" (Postman 1969, 101). Language organizes reality, promoting the potential for increased scientific rigor for Japanese researchers using English and exposing the potential for more desirable and satisfying experiences by users of CMC. Stuart Hall is not as eager to embrace this constructivist stance; "Reality exists outside language, but it is constantly mediated by and through language: and what we can know and say has to be produced in and through discourse" (Hall 1980, 131). Similar to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativism, which Strate describes as, "the idea that different languages are associated with different worldviews" (Strate 2004, 34), Hall's interpretation of constructivism positions language as highly influential upon, but not deterministic of, reality.

Joseph Walther hypothesizes that users of CMC conform to the usual human drive to create social relationships and that, lacking any other means of communication, they use text and eventually "learn to adapt their verbal behavior to the restrictions of the textual medium" (Walther 1996, 9). This follows the Simmelian imperative, as Todd Gitlin explains, "He develops goals and exercises his will to attain them through making and using tools" (Gitlin 2002, 37). Among other tools described by this process is the solution to a challenge that had gone unresolved through the history of the written word, that of guiding the intended voice, the interpretation meant to be implied by a written phrase. Through a variety of visual devices using the letters and symbols

commonly available on a keyboard, CMC users have devised means to apply univocal reading to otherwise decontextualized prose⁶, helping a communicative partner to understand when a message is meant in jest, when the author is upset, or when the author is amused about something (Bolter 1996, 108).

In a 1996 paper, Walther introduced the concept of "...hyperpersonal communication – CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel [F2F] interaction" (Walther 1996, 17). This model is supported by a number of complimentary theories regarding CMC that describe ways in which users overcome what Jacobson referred to as the "paucity of social cues [that] poses problems for the organization of social relations in cyberspace" (Jacobson 1996, 461).

Social Identity-DEindividuation (SIDE), a theory attributed primarily to Martin Lea and Russell Spears, describes a tendency by individuals to regress towards group norms and to assign to their communicative partners assumed norms regarding their groups. According to the authors, "the fundamental processes assumed by SIDE to account for the effects of anonymity on normative behavior in CMC are depersonalized perceptions of self and others not as individuals...but as representatives of social groups" (Postmes, Spears, and Lea 1998, 698). This process of being reduced from an individual to a representative of social norms is "deindividuation." A cynical reading of this process might lead to accusations of prejudice, though this would be true only in the most literal of terms, "pre-judging."

⁶ The most popular of these are "emoticons," combinations of symbols to simulate an expressive "face." For example, a smile :-) a frown :-(or a wink ;-) .

Essentially, when there is nothing else to work with, CMC partners will assume stereotypes apply to each other until enough individuating information has been exchanged to dispel those assumptions. Similarly, the partners will tend to communicate along the lines of social norms expected of the groups with whom they have affiliated. These positions will adjust over time as more information is shared and disconfirming revelations appear. SIDE is usually seen as having more efficacy in finding areas of mutual interest, leading to connection, than in establishing distance between individuals (Postmes, et al., 1998, 698).

In time, the participants will become more familiar with each other, primarily through displays of knowledge and humor, though direct self-disclosure will also occur, impacting SIDE judgments. Walther's theory of Social Information Processing (SIP) puts forth the idea that participants in CMC will look for information regarding their partners within the constellation of "...content and linguistic strategies, as well as chronemic...and typographic cues" (Tidwell and Walther 2002, 319) available through the text. This leads to a phenomenon Walther describes as either "Optimized Self-Presentation" or "Selective Self-Presentation (SSP)" (Walther 1996, 20).

Through CMC, especially when the communication is asynchronous, as it is in email exchanges where a response is not expected immediately, a person has the opportunity to edit a text so as to evoke the most desirable response from the intended recipient or recipients. The fact that what is written is all that the recipient will be able to know of the author generally demands that this selective self-presentation provides an optimized self-presentation, thus the use of both terms. Going through this process,

a communicative partner will often assume that the recipient will be equally as conscious of self-presentation when forming a response.

As discussed by Lee Harrington and Denise Bielby, status within an online community is independent of a person's status off of the Internet, as, "...the relative absence of cues regarding conventional social and personal characteristics, other traits determine status and influence" (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 609). In this milieu, peoples' knowledge, helpfulness, humor, and proven abilities are what rate their worth. "For example, computer hackers involved in illegal activities are reluctant to change their pseudonyms because the status they gain through on-line demonstrations of technical expertise accrues to that pseudonym" (Wellman, et al. 1996, 223).⁷ A participant in the research of Edward Downes and Sally McMillan explained, "...people can meet on the basis of 'what they are thinking and writing' rather than on the basis of physical characteristics" (Downes and McMillan 2000, 168).

Ultimately these processes: SIDE, SIP, SSP, and an alternative basis for status and social capital, allow computer-mediated communication that exceeds face-to-face interaction in certain ways. CMC reduces people to their thoughts (or, at least, the thoughts they choose to share and the styles in which they choose to express those

⁷ I have been asked whether a "copycat" might adopt the pseudonym. While this is possible, this act would be more likely done by a novice, who did not have a "name" for her self. If the skills and notoriety of the authentic hacker were significant enough to entice fraudulent assumption of the moniker, the established hacker's ability to visit retribution upon the novice would probably deter the fraud. Sherry Turkle had a parallel experience in which she found out that there was a "Dr. Sherry" who had taken to inviting people into her virtual office to interview people about the psychology of MUDs. Having found this appropriation of what she considered her identity to be quite disquieting, she looked into it and found out that the goppleganger was created by two students who had used her name as synonymous with "cybershrink" (Turkle 1995, 16-17).

thoughts), eliminating physical and social characteristics. Ultimately, in a hyperpersonal relationship, you are what you write.

Convenience and Consistency

While traditional, face-to-face relationships are often considered the “gold standard,” (see McQuillen 2003; Putnam 1995) mediated relationships provide several benefits that allow them to be considered as attractive supplements to F2F. Among these are convenience and consistency, which will be described in this section. These qualities allow individuals a degree of freedom they are unable to attain in F2F, primarily due to the situational restraints, such as finding the time to get together despite busy schedules.

In a way, mediated relationships can be compared to national restaurant chains, like McDonald’s. McDonald’s restaurants are readily accessible, many of them open at all hours. You know what to expect when you go – the menu changes only slightly and no matter which location you visit the food will be from the same distributor and prepared the same way. It is an experience defined by convenience and consistency. In the same way, parasocial and hyperpersonal interactions tend to be available at all hours, and the tenor of the interactions is unlikely to vary significantly from one experience to the next.

A natural question in response to this analogy might be whether we want “McRelationships,” sacrificing the quality, authenticity, and adventure of a venue that cooks to order for the safety and reliability of fast food. Umberto Eco puts forth the

concept of *hyperreality*, in which a synthesized reality is able to provide a more satisfying experience than a natural one. To illustrate, he compares a trip to Disneyland's "Wild Rivers," where you are guaranteed to see "alligators," to a trip to the authentically wild rivers of New Orleans, where you might be lucky enough to see an alligator (Eco 1986). This is similar to Daniel Boorstin's "graphic revolution" which Lance Strate summarizes; "...our technologies have given us extravagant expectations about the world, and led us to replace reality with our now easily manufactured illusions." Postman is somewhat more passionate in his discussion of the "graphic revolution," accusing it of waging an "assault," aimed at undermining "traditional definitions of information, of news, and, to a large extent, of reality itself" (Postman 1985, 74). A respondent in Downes and McMillan's research asked, "'If I can get the full experience in the synthesized form, do I need the place?'" (Downes and McMillan 2000, 169). What do we trade when we move away from F2F and towards the convenience and consistency of mediated relationships?

Convenience

Both parasocial and hyperpersonal interactions are available at the touch of a button. "Now individuals can simply turn on the radio or television, call a 900 number, or switch on the computer and achieve two-way primary interaction 24 hours per day" (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 113). In an age of increasing demands on our time, convenience has become a motivating force not to be underestimated. According to Wellman, et al., "People can participate within the comfort and safety of their own homes...at any time,

and at their own convenience” (Wellman, et al., 1996, 222) while Cerulo, et al., assert “...media generated primary groups may be the only available source of social affiliation that is amenable to the hectic pace and time constraints of personal schedules” (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 125).

Keeping in touch is almost effortless now, even with the expanded social circles many users of CMC now enjoy through the accessibility allowed by the medium. A single missive may be sent to several recipients at once (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 114), modified slightly when addressed to groups with different levels of intimacy, allowing for varying levels of hyperpersonal interaction. Each of these emails has the potential for a personal, intimate reply, or one that is sent to any portion of the group included in the initial email. The recent popularization of *Twitter* takes this phenomenon a step further as individuals expose their moment-to-moment thoughts, feelings, and activities to all and sundry who are interested in receiving them. Commenting on the increasing number of celebrity “tweets,” as the individual Twitter entries are called, Jussi-Pekka Erkkola believes “this kind of possibility and activity might make parasocial relationships even stronger” (Erkkola 2009). These tweets reinforce the parasocial relationship, especially when they are listed side-by-side with non-celebrity tweets.

One significant difference between mediated and unmediated relationships is the ease with which failure to realize expectations may result in the demotion or termination of a relationship (more on this later under *Predicted Outcome Value*). A parasocial relationship can be discontinued either through a program’s cancellation or through a viewer ignoring the show. Most Internet services provide tools to easily

restrict access from undesired contact so that a user can limit or block interaction with other users, either selectively or universally. In more extreme cases, a user has the option of abandoning a screen name altogether.

Several authors touch upon a concept of situational and spatial drivers as contributing to the appeal and convenience of parasocial and hyperpersonal relationships. Lance Strate, Ronald Jacobson, and Stephanie Gibson clarify that this does not refer to physical or perceptual space, but to

...conceptual space, the sense of space generated within our minds [which] may include memories of perceptual space, as well as imagined and fictional spaces that have never been perceived.... It is the realm of the mind's eye and the place where we look when we turn inward in thought (Strate, Jacobson, and Gibson 1996, 14).

This is most easily seen when considering the lexicon of the Internet: *website*, *cyberspace*, *chat room*, and *Information Superhighway* are all spatial metaphors into which we extend ourselves. "*Telepresence*," as described by Strate, et al. (1996, 10), "...refers to the transmission of the user's 'presence' to another location, allowing the user to act from a distance." Joshua Meyrowitz describes how "Electronic media have combined previously distinct social settings, moved the dividing line between private and public behavior toward the private, and weakened the relationship between social situations and physical places" (Meyrowitz 1986, 100). By disconnecting ourselves from restrictions of space and time, we gain the ultimate in convenience. Pierre Lévy explains how tools of electronic media allow us to control time and space;

“synchronization replaces spatial unity,” as allowed for by television and instant messages, while “interconnection is substituted for temporal unity” (Lévy 1998, 30) as allowed for by email and video recording.

We have entered an era where, as described by Harrington and Bielby, “the rearrangement of space, time, and interaction” and a shifting of “situational geography” have resulted in the creation of new interpersonal speech situations such that being “at work” no longer means that we are at our place of employment, but that regardless of our physical location, we are engaging in the activity of working (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 608). This situation has been created through the establishment of contexts of interaction as reflecting both a physical aspect and a cognitive dimension, according to Jacobson (1996, 462), while Meyrowitz explains how “Our shared sphere of interaction is informational rather than physical” (Meyrowitz 1986, 107). Dennis Waskul, Mark Douglass, and Charles Edgley offer, “...on-line environments dislocate the physical body from the context of social interaction” (Waskul, et al., 2000, 380).

Considering the mosaic of activities we experience through computer “windows,” Sherry Turkle saw that we are no longer “...simply playing different roles in different settings at different times.... The life practice of windows is that of a decentered self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time” (Turkle 1995, 14).⁸ What Harold Innis taught us about media being the key to control at a distance has become a startling reality as we can now be anywhere or, more significantly, we can now be *everywhere*, accessible to whoever opens a website or plays a DVD.

⁸ This multiplicity of roles is addressed with more detail below, described as *dramaturgy*.

Consistency

Also impacting both parasocial and hyperpersonal interactions is the element of *consistency*. In parasocial relationships, this term takes on two meanings. The first is temporal – television shows run on a schedule, so personae who are the subject of a parasocial relationship are expected at particular times on particular days. For some, it is a weekly connection while others make themselves available to their viewers almost daily. This is the likely reason daytime television shows and nightly newscasts seem to promote the most compelling parasocial interactions, and are thus used most often as examples in the literature (see Cerulo, et al. 1992; Giles 2002; McQuillen 2003). Patricia Wallace finds that the more often and consistent interactions are, the stronger the relationship developing from those interactions will be (Wallace 1999, 139). A change in the schedule or cast may trigger feelings of anger from regular viewers who see the change as a betrayal or abandonment (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 114). According to Cerulo, et al., “By tuning in every day, viewers identify with and experience the trials and tribulations of their television friends” (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 116). Whether it is a talk show, soap opera, or newscast, when scholars study PSI they turn to daily programs for material reflecting the depth of emotion felt by viewers.

The second “consistency” we refer to is the unwavering characteristics of the personae with whom viewers engage in parasocial interaction. Studies show that the predictable nature of a television persona is part of the attraction. These people provide comfortable, unchallenging relationships to viewers. Whether it is a smile from a talk

show host, a stern rebuke from a television judge, or the foolish romanticism of a soap opera hero, we know what to expect from our parasocial relationships. As Horton and Wohl explain "...they very quickly develop, or have imputed to them, stylized character traits which...they will indulge in and exploit regularly in program after program. The member of the audience... accumulates an historical picture of 'the kinds of people they really are'" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 4).

One of the reasons we are able to figure out "the kinds of people they really are" is because these characters are drawn from our frameworks of knowledge to form the most acceptable and accessible personalities, our preconceived archetypes. As phrased by Gitlin, "To keep a fidgety audience in place, characters had to be rapidly recognizable. Since a mass audience is diverse, there had to be a variety of predictable types" (Gitlin 2002, 110). Protagonists will resemble our friends, family, and heroes while antagonists will usually be over the top in their attempts to spurn those qualities we most admire by adopting traits diametrically opposed. To challenge the audience's prejudices is to risk alienating them. But how can we really "know" someone who we are only exposed to for a few minutes, even if regularly, whether they are weekly or daily? David Holt answers this question by comparing the insights an analyst might glean from spending an hour a week with someone to the deep reading of *Hamlet* for insight into the Dane (Holt 1989, 167).

The need to maintain this consistency of character is so pervasive that it has long gone hand-in-hand with the public positioning of the actor, "the continuity of their representation," (Giles 2002, 292). An actor who makes his living playing a straight-

laced role model will be urged to position himself away from controversy whereas one who plays a daredevil may be urged towards more outrageous behavior. For example, when it was discovered that teen actress and “good girl” Jamie Lynn Spears was pregnant, her television show on youth-oriented Nickelodeon, which was marketed to tween and teen girls, was cancelled.⁹

This consistency of character also accounts for the longevity of parasocial relationships. Giles explains, “...repeated viewing...will intensify...aspects of PSI” (Giles 2002, 292) while Kenneth Gergen offers,

Popular shows are typically rebroadcast in succeeding years. The patient viewer can still resonate with Groucho Marx on *You Bet Your Life* or Jackie Gleason and Audrey Meadows on *The Honeymooners*...any given actor may transcend his or her own death; viewers can continue their private relationships with Marilyn Monroe and James Dean long after the physical demise of the performers. With television, a personage may continue a robust life over eternity” (Gergen 1991, 55).

When Horton and Wohl wrote in 1956, “Groucho is always sharp,” they could not have known that they could have appended their statement with “in perpetuity.” The ability for a persona to generate strong parasocial interactions holds the key to virtual immortality.

⁹ Other similar controversies have surrounded Vanessa Hudgens, star of *High School Musical* (naked pictures distributed online), Miley Cyrus, star of *Hannah Montana* (suggestive photos in *Vanity Fair* and others distributed online), Michael Phelps, Olympic swimmer (photographed smoking marijuana), and Paul Reubens, star of *Pee Wee’s Playhouse* (caught masturbating in an adult movie theater).

Dramaturgy

Regardless of whether we are interacting face-to-face or through media technology, we are always playing a role. This idea appears repeatedly in the literature, though addressed differently. Role-taking, or dramaturgy, is cited as a consequence or benefit (alternatively, depending on the author's point of view) of media in our culture, as a key to psychological constructivism, and as a mode of communication in relationships.

This section discusses these processes of role-taking, termed *dramaturgy* by Erving Goffman, who addresses this phenomenon most directly in his work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). We are exposed to a growing variety of roles daily, according to Gergen (1991), all of which impact us – most subtly, but some in a more substantial manner. The greatest impact a role-impression can have on a person will result in it contributing to an internal dialogue, which Hubert Hermans and Giancarlo Dimaggio term the *Dialogical Self* (Hermans and Dimaggio 2007), indicating that these impressions become a new voice in our decision-making and represent possible models by which to behave. Once people are exposed to roles and have incorporated them into their collection of potential self-expressions, they perform the roles in relationship to others in unmediated as well as in mediated interactions.

The Saturated Self

In “The Saturated Self,” Gergen compares the availability of social connections for the average American before and after the popular availability of television,

explaining how "...the typical commuter may confront as many different persons (in terms of views or images) in the first two hours of a day as the community-based predecessor did in a month" (Gergen 1991, 62). Each of these images creates an impression, becoming internalized. Edward Sampson describes this process, "...society constitutes and inhabits the very core of whatever passes for personhood: each is interpenetrated by its other" (Sampson 1989, 4). This penetration of society into the self leads to what Gergen describes as a "...*multiphrenic* condition, in which one begins to experience the vertigo of unlimited multiplicity" (Gergen 1991, 49). This condition is echoed by Gitlin who predicts that, "...each person will be multiple. Each will feel disordered and restless. Each will be comfortable relating to, feeling with, trying out the most accessible repertory of stories and sounds.... Each will sprout multiple auxiliary relationships to figures who never breathed" (Gitlin 2002, 206). Both through the observation of multiple personae day to day and having been granted the ability to multitask and connect on levels impossible before modern mass media, post-modern people become imbued with "a multiplicity of self-investments" (Gergen 1991, 74), each making demands upon a person's time and energy as "Each new desire places its demands and reduces one's liberties" (Gergen 1991, 75). This eternity of "oughts" leaves us "...enveloped in the guilt born of all that was possible but now foreclosed" (Gergen 1991, 77).

Many other theorists, including Lévy and Marshall McLuhan, touch upon the same effect. Lévy refers to the impact of this social saturation, the internal metamorphose and bifurcation of our world as we incorporate these new worlds, as

“heterogenesis” (Lévy 1998, 31), having earlier established that exposure to a role often must precede adoption of it, as “...virtualization is one of the principal vectors in the creation of reality” (Lévy 1998, 27). Marshall McLuhan describes this as “...the electronically induced technological extensions of our central nervous system...enabling man to incorporate within himself the whole of mankind” (McLuhan 1969, 248).

Horton and Wohl see the “sheer volume” of exposure to patterns in other peoples’ lives as “instruction” in the “...behaviors of the opposite sex, of people of higher and lower status, of people in particular occupations and professions” (Horton and Wohl 1956, 11) as among the greatest benefits of PSI while Annese thinks

The notion of a fluid identity...built in interaction with the other, finds its apotheosis in the technological society where social relationships are multiplied by spatial and temporal dispersion.... Through mediated processes, remote people and situations enter everyday social worlds by unhinging the nature of social interactions” (Annese 2004, 373)

Turkle takes this one step further, believing that with CMC it is “possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion. Identity, after all, refers to the sameness between two qualities, in this case between a person and his or her persona” (Turkle 1995, 12).

The Dialogical Self

Having endured this barrage of roles, how do people integrate any of these potential selves in such a way that they become impressed upon their larger “self?” Hermans offers a constructivist view he refers to through much of his writing as the “dialogical self.” He lays the groundwork for this theory by offering that it is not uncommon to consider oneself spatially, for example being of two minds on a matter, telling oneself something is true, or considering a situation “on the one hand...but on the other hand,” perhaps leading to the frustration in *Fiddler on the Roof* where Tevye exclaims, upon reaching a third set of considerations “there is no other hand!” (Stein 1964, 135). These are simple examples of internal dialogues that are given voice through the impressions that have been made upon us by social interactions. Even as you read these words now, there is likely a particular “voice” in which you “hear” them, and it is not the same voice you use when responding to this text.

The I has, moreover, the capacity to imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story involved in processes of question and answer, agreement and disagreement, and negotiation and cooperation. Each of them has a story to tell about its own experience from its own stance...some voices have more social power than others, with the result that some voices are neglected, suppressed, or just not heard (Hermans and Ramirez 2004, 304).

Hermans and Ramirez describe a process similar to social saturation in which exposure to “...a broadening range of meanings, values, ideas, and mental operations...” allows us “...the opportunity to become increasingly multivoiced...the

voices of other people, groups, communities, and cultures become part of our private worlds and create new interfaces for dialogical relations to emerge” (Hermans and Ramirez 2004, 305). This multivoiced construct is a departure from older views of self, escaping the autonomous Cartesian ego and leaping into postmodern plurality. Turkle discusses how participants in CMC “...become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction” (Turkle 1995, 12). Julia Wood and Steve Duck concisely state, “In short, we and our relationships become, or arise, in discourse” (Wood and Duck 1995, 11).

Gitlin derides this postmodernist belief that individuals consist of layer upon layer of role potentials and internal scripts, “all the way down” to a core where “no one is home” (Gitlin 2003, 206), though he regretfully admits there is something to it. Jay Bolter is more supportive:

The self has been regarded as an autonomous ego, as the author of the text that constitutes one’s mental life.... The self is no longer constructed as an autonomous, authorial voice; it becomes instead a wandering eye that occupies various perspectives, one after another. This virtual eye knows what it knows not through a capacity for abstract reasoning, but rather through empathy, through the sharing of the ‘point of view’ of the object of knowledge (Bolter 1985, 106).

It is with this empathetic eye that we “read between the lines” when interacting with people through CMC, “seeing” who they are and transporting ourselves to the virtual space in which the interaction occurs. It is the same eye that we use when watching television and find ourselves inside the screen, a part of the lives of those we

see and hear right in front of us. It should also be noted that Bolter's "eye" could be read as "I" to similar effect.

Dramaturgy in Relationships

Individuals who have been exposed to and "enselved" (Waskul, et al. 2000) a new role are now able to practice that role with others, building upon it and using it to create new expressions of self. Several authors touch upon the ways in which these new selves come into play in our interactions; even from the earliest days of PSI theory, Horton and Wohl saw "...enactment of a para-social role may therefore constitute an exploration and development of new role possibilities" (1956, 10). Annese offers "Identity is the product of social practices in which the individual is involved" (Annese 2004, 371) while Richard Cutler sees interaction as facilitating construction of self on two levels, producing changes "...towards self-concept building...and group identity building. So, by acting out roles or taking on expanded or new identities, participants become changed selves" (Cutler 1996, 327).

Lévy credits the environment in which an expression of self emerges for the qualities that expression assumes; "The virtualization of a given entity consists in determining the general question to which it responds" (Lévy 1998, 26). Wood and Duck find that "...selves are recognized as contingent, forming and re-forming within diverse relationships and circumstances" (Wood and Duck 1995, 9). Similarly, Goffman, the theorist most closely associated with *dramaturgy*, comments on our capacity to be many things to many people without sacrificing our ability to transform again for another audience.

A self, then, virtually awaits the individual entering a position; he need only conform to the pressures on him and he will find a *me* ready-made for him.... While manifestly participating in one system of roles, the individual will have some capacity to hold in abeyance his involvement in other patterns, thus sustaining one or more dormant roles that are enacted roles on other occasions...such scheduling implies some jurisdictional agreements as to where and what the individual is to be when. This *role-segregation* maybe facilitated by *audience-segregation*, so that those who figure in one of the individual's major role-sets do not figure in another, thereby allowing the individual to possess contradictory qualities. (Goffman 1961, 87-91)

This indicates that we possess the psychological tools to recognize that a particular "self" is the appropriate one to bring to the front in a particular situation, suppressing less appropriate expressions. We are, thus, not only multiplied in our selves, but in our sensitivities to others. Without this sensitivity, we would be unable to express ourselves correctly in the immediate environment.

Other theorists comment upon how these internal discussions help us prepare for external interactions. Meyrowitz notes how "We...are all performing roles in new theaters that demand new styles of drama" (Meyrowitz 1986, 101). According to Giles, "...individuals plan, and rehearse, interaction with others... this imaginative activity may be an influential factor in the outcome of real social interaction" (Giles 2002, 287). Individuals who have been exposed to a role and have begun to use it in preparation for encounters, finding comfort in its use and a type of fluency in its expression, will find themselves using that role for self- expression with increasingly regularity. "The self-image available for anyone entering a particular position is one of which he may become affectively and cognitively enamored, desiring and expecting to see himself in

terms of the enactment of the role and the self-identification emerging from this enactment" (Goffman 1961, 89).

Gergen describes how our exposure to situations on television, such as meeting a Japanese businessman or being told that one's mate is considering divorce, allow us to respond to the situation with practiced certainty, as "...the drama has so often been played out on television and movie screens that one is already prepared with multiple options" (Gergen 1991, 71). These exposures may have unexpected results, such as might occur when examples of antisocial behavior become available. One particularly problematic example of this is the education of criminals in forensic science through television shows like *CSI* (Bashani 2008).

CMC allows users considerable opportunities to exercise a multiplicity of selves, particularly giving voice to those "*I* positions" that are suppressed in everyday lives. Beyond being able to escape the social and physiological limits of our corporeal selves, a function cited by several authors (Gergen 1991, 93; Harrington and Bielby 1995, 609; Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman 2000), users of CMC are able to create numerous screen names from which to present distinct selves online. Hermans and Ramirez, using "avatar" as a synonym for screen name, explain, "The user identifies with the avatar as a new position in the external domain of the self and internalizes its attitudes, values, and interaction styles that may then lead to the transformation of the internal domain of the self," allowing the user to "...experiment with the innovation of the self by introducing new positions in a space that is less restricted by traditional power structures" (Hermans and Ramirez 2004, 310). Kolko, Nakamura, and Rodman describe

“the multiple and dispersed self in cyberspace – a fluid subject that traversed the wires of electronic communication venues and embodied, through its virtual disembodiment, postmodern subjectivity” (Kolko, et al., 2000, 5).

Interpersonal Communication Theories

Beyond the similarities in what gratifications individuals receive from relationships, we can examine the means by which face-to-face relationships are developed and maintained. Theories which are the basis of Interpersonal Communication are applicable to both parasocial and hyperpersonal relationships, though the parallels are more directly visible in the latter. Giles explains that “...people use fundamentally the same cognitive processes in both interpersonal and mediated communication” (Giles 2002, 286). The same information gathering and uncertainty reducing routines are performed through CMC as through F2F interactions in the development of a relationship, though additional time is needed to process written versus aural (and F2F nonverbal) communication, as described by Jacobson, “...the problems of reducing uncertainty and managing diversity are no less challenging for participants, and no less interesting for observers, than those found elsewhere” (Jacobson 1996, 474).

Uncertainty Reduction Theory (URT), put forth by Berger and Calabrese (1975), describes three strategies by which a person might seek to uncover information about another person. Information may be sought out passively, by observing the subject interacting with others, actively, by asking others about the subject or by manipulating

an environment so that the subject can be observed in a particular situation, or interactively, by directing questions to the subject or by offering information to the subject in the hope that the subject will reciprocate.

Individuals quickly form expectations regarding the potentials for relationships and will assign a Predicted Outcome Value (POV), as theorized by Michael Sunnafrank and Artemio Ramirez (2004), to potential communicative partners. In F2F interactions, this evaluation is generally referred to as a first impression and is based upon an individual's physical presentation and initial verbal exchanges. This information is processed in order to determine whether a relationship will be rewarding (a positive POV), in which case contact will be pursued and increased. Otherwise, if a negative POV is determined, contact with the communicative partner will be restricted or avoided.

Similarly, Social Exchange Theories (SET) (Blau 1964; Emerson 1976; Homans 1961; Thibaut and Kelley 1959) seek to assign values to an ongoing relationship or to behaviors that will directly impact these relationships. Utilitarian in nature, reducing aspects of a person to assets and liabilities allows for an objective judgment that can help a person determine whether the relationship is valuable enough to maintain, if a potential alternative would be preferable, or if any alternative would be better than remaining in the current relationship.

In parasocial relationships, POV can be recognized in the simple decision of whether to watch a particular show based on such criteria as the participating actors, producers, network, genre, timeslot, and competition. Any of these criteria might indicate that a

program may be of interest to a particular viewer, in which case the “relationship” will be pursued (given that parasocial relationships are the primary drivers of a program’s success, as noted above). Uncertainty Reduction strategies that might be employed include listening to other people talking about the show or characters on it (passive), asking other people about the show or characters on it (active), or watching the show (interactive).

For computer-mediated communication, Predicted Outcome Value might be based upon something as simple as a person’s email or screen name, the alphanumeric identification they choose to represent themselves online. For example, if someone were seeking to connect with a female, *HairyBarry* would probably not be included for consideration, while a Star Wars enthusiast seeking a like-minded individual might be happy to find *YodaYenta*. Additionally, many online services, especially those that are used for social networking, allow users to create profiles that can add to a POV evaluation, as well as act as a form of passive URT strategy. Another passive URT strategy might be reading posts¹⁰ from the user or watching them interact in a chat room. A more active strategy would be asking other users about the subject.

Substance of Mediated Relationships

American society and our level of interpersonal interaction have changed drastically since World War II. Cerulo, et al., point to “...high divorce rates, fragmented families, fast-track careers, and social mobility” (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 109) as threats to

¹⁰ “Post” refers to text added to an electronic bulletin-board service, social group, email list (aka list-serv), blog (web log), or other website.

traditional sources of interpersonal ties while Robert Putnam (1995) bemoans the decline in social connections and civic engagement, or “social capital” for which he holds television largely responsible. According to Wellman, et al. (1996, 226), “Community has moved indoors to private homes from its former semi-public, accessible milieus such as cafes, parks, and pubs.” Concurrent with these changes have been the rise of media technologies which can either be seen as contributing to or facilitating these changes, or as arising in response to needs created by these changes. In reviewing the work of Frank Zingrone, Strate phrases this paradox; “...electronic media provide a simplified image of reality as a counter to the increasing complexity of society brought on by technological innovation” (Strate 2004, 11). Whether viewing media as cause, solution, or both, it is important to understand the extent to which mediated relationships fulfill the needs of interpersonal contact and the factors that are important for relationships to be established, such as a shared sense of identity or purpose, strong and enduring emotional bonds, and social control.

Giles holds that “...on-line communication and parasocial interaction are only alike in that the interactants are distant from one another” (Giles 2002, 285), a position that proves unsustainable when faced with the similarities in terms of strength, convenience, and ability to provide succor in a world that grows increasingly isolating. The actual forms of the interactions are different, one enjoying a capacity for more reciprocal interaction (hyperpersonal) while the other consists of more restricted levels of interaction, but richer social information (parasocial), but these two phenomena share far more similarities than differences. It is in their effects, not their causes, that the

relationships that develop from these media find their similar potency. These mediated forms of interaction are even more powerful when established synergistically, as can be seen when television producers attempt to leverage the strength of hyperpersonal interaction to reinforce parasocial relationships by publishing internet texts like “character blogs,” in which entries attributed to fictional characters are posted to the show’s website.¹¹ A recent episode of *House, M.D.* in which one of the characters is found dead of an apparently self-inflicted gunshot ended with a message that viewers could turn to a website¹² to discuss their feelings on the loss.

This invitation for intimacy begs several important questions: Are hyperpersonal and parasocial relationships “real?” Are they as substantial as traditional, face-to-face relationships? Is it possible for a relationship to be established in a virtual reality, whether it is one presented on a television screen or one created psychologically when entering CMC? Gergen maintains that face-to-face interaction is not a requirement, citing, “Some of the world’s most intense affairs of the heart (Heloise and Abelard, Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning) were carried on largely by written world” (Gergen 1991, 56). Lévy provides insight into how we might usefully consider the “real” and the “virtual.”

The virtual is that which has potential rather than actual existence. The virtual *tends* toward actualization, without undergoing any form of effective or formal concretization. The tree is virtually present in the seed. Strictly speaking, the virtual should not be compared with the real but the actual, for virtuality and

¹¹ For an example of a character blog, see <http://www.usanetwork.com/series/psych/blogs/>

¹² The original website, <http://www.fox.com/kutner>, is no longer active. A site on Facebook now serves its function. <http://www.facebook.com/pages/In-Loving-Memory-of-Lawrence-Kutner-on-House/63172043443>

actuality are merely two different ways of being...Unlike the possible, which is static and already constituted, the virtual is a kind of problematic complex, the knot of tendencies or forces that accompanies a situation, event, object, or entity, and which invokes a process of resolution: actualization (Lévy 1998, 23-24).

He more succinctly offers, "...the virtual is not imaginary. It produces effects" (Lévy 1998, 30). All of our relationships are in flux, whether they are mediated or unmediated. They are all built around past experiences – sensations, emotions, and thoughts – and considered desires for additional, increased, or reduced interaction in the future. It is thus that relationships survive the death (or cancellation) of a relational partner – we continue to consider them and often wish we could see them again.

How does a relationship built through parasocial interaction compare to one built through CMC or to traditional face-to-face relationships? At first glance, it seems unlikely that a relationship with someone with whom you can stand in front of and see eye-to-eye with could possibly compare to one with a television character or someone with whom you've shared nothing but a series of written messages. Satoshi Kanazawa argues that these relationships are possible due to a type of cognitive dissonance that is the result of modern stimuli failing to conform to the conditions under which the human brain evolved.

The human brain and its psychological mechanisms are adapted to the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA), in which they evolved and for which they were designed, and they are not necessarily adaptive in the current environment...[they] should therefore be strongly biased to view and respond to the environment as if it were still the EEA, and they should have difficulty comprehending and dealing with entities and situations that did not exist in the EEA (Kanazawa 2002, 168).

Put more plainly, thousands of years ago, seeing someone meant that the person was there in front of you and available for interaction. Seeing someone in front of you regularly meant that you had some sort of relationship with the person. Similarly, if you were involved in reciprocal communication with someone, that person would be someone with whom you had direct contact. Our brains are simply taking the stimuli available to them and making assumptions logical to the environment in which they developed.

Byron Reeves and Clifford Nass come to the same conclusion. In sharing the results of their studies, they reveal that

Equating mediated and real life is neither rare nor unreasonable. It is very common.... The media equation – *media equal real life* – applies to everyone, it applies often, and it is highly consequential.... In short, we have found that individuals' interactions with computers, television, and new media are *fundamentally social and natural*, just like interactions in real life (emphasis theirs, Reeves and Nass 1996, 5).

Giles would seem to agree; "PSI may arise from an altruistic human instinct to form attachments with others, at no matter how remote a distance...social responses are automatically elicited by any cues that are related to human characteristics" (Giles 2002, 284). As humans are social by nature, desiring contact with others, it is (literally) only natural for people to want to connect with the mediated others they encounter.

In order to address the questions surrounding the importance and potency of mediated relationships, we must first discuss what is necessary for a relationship to occur. Requirements include a shared sense of identity or purpose, strong and enduring emotional bonds, and social control, according to Cerulo, et al. (1992, 109). *“The presence or absence of primary group ties, as generated by any communication, must be defined in terms of the effects generated by the interaction”* [emphasis theirs] (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 113). For Cerulo, et al., mediated relationships can be acceptable parallels for traditional face-to-face interpersonal relationships, meeting several requirements necessary for a primary relationship.

Shared Sense of Identity or Purpose

Hyperpersonal relationships often begin by participants “meeting” in a chat room, posting messages on a listserv or blog, or through social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace. Participants in these relationships, then, usually start off with a locus of shared experience stemming from the site of their connection. This requirement of relationship is also seen in the observed SIDE effect, in which group norms are used as a basis for communication in CMC.

A shared sense of identity with a television persona may be derived from identification with a subject’s demographic profile, such as the young women who were found to be most prone towards mourning the untimely death of Princess Diana (Brown, Basil, and Bocarnea 2003). Giles suggests that parasocial interactions are most likely when people think subjects could be their friends (Giles 2002, 284). Cerulo, et al.,

discuss how a social circle forms around the locus of a shared parasocial relationship. In the description of PSI, it was found that a strong parasocial relationship evokes discussion regarding its subject. As participants in the discussion connect with each other, especially considering the expanded ability to connect through CMC, social circles form around the locus of the subject of the PSI. These discussions, held in absence of the parasocial subject, reinforce the parasocial relationship between the people engaging in the conversation as the shared emotional contact confirms the feelings of the participants (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 113).

Strong and Enduring Emotional Bonds

The strength of emotional bonds created through parasocial interactions can be vividly illustrated by attacks endured by actors playing villainous roles (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 122; Giles 2002, 294), by the widespread mourning of Princess Diana (Brown, et al., 2003) and Lucille Ball (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 122), or by the way “Viewers celebrate when characters marry or give birth, sending gifts and greetings to the studio” (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 122). We also see the strength of these bonds when examining the cult of personality that surrounds talk show hosts like Oprah Winfrey whose viewers, when calling into the show, “...feel quite comfortable...comment[ing] on her current hairstyle, clothing, or weight” (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 117). This effect is so pronounced that Gitlin felt the need to specifically point out “...the viewer is not (ordinarily) naïve. She knows that fictional beings will not step out of the screen...nor will the actors recognize her in the flesh” a conclusion that Gitlin feels is “...so obvious and

fundamental...that to call attention to its strangeness seems banal or superfluous” (Gitlin 2002, 23). When a viewer is so naïve as to be unable to discern reality from fictional representation, this represents a pathology more than a dissent against theorists who would agree with the *media equation* described by Reeves and Nass.

Through CMC, especially in online communities like Multi-User Domains (MUDs) – Object Oriented (MOOs), participants give themselves over to the illusionary world they enter. These communities are much like extended chat rooms where individuals assume identities unique to the “world” in which they are participating. Because it is a fictional or stylized role they are playing, they engage in such bonding practices as MUD weddings, often with the full knowledge and consent of their “real life” partners and often to individuals they may never meet in person. One participant in Jacobson’s study of MUD behavior claimed that the friendships he had developed online were his best friends while another said, “Although MOOs may be imaginary worlds, the feelings they induce...can be as real as those generated by and experienced in offline events and relationships” (Jacobson 1996, 467). Even outside of these contained worlds, Wellman, et al., finds that “...people find social support, companionship, and a sense of belonging through the normal course of [Computer-Supported Social Networks]...even when they are composed of persons they hardly know” (Wellman 1996, 220).

Social Control

Media have powerful impacts on us individually as members of a society, and upon society itself. This is a claim that there seems to be no argument against in the literature of media ecology or interpersonal communication. According to Lévy, media are among a handful of agents which "...structure our social reality with the greatest force, perhaps even the greatest violence" (Lévy 1998, 30). Whether online or on television, "...representations...exert real influence that allows people to respond to them as if they were real" (Waskul, et al., 2000, 379).

The field of media ecology could be described as an exploration of the social controls wielded by media, so it is no surprise that the literature of this discipline is rife with examples of this power. Innis spoke of how a society's understanding of media allowed it to take control in the most literal sense, as military leaders who took advantage of light, portable media were able to send orders to troops further afield as well as to receive status reports and requests from distant governors (Innis 1951, 35-36).

Using this historical understanding, McLuhan probed that the new electronic media would upend society, "retribalizing" it to a state less dependent upon hierarchy and fully embracing post-modern pluralism (McLuhan 1964, 24), a sentiment echoed by Lévy, who notes that "...each technosocial 'machine' adds a space-time...a kind of elastic and complicated system in which expanses are covered over, deformed, and interconnected" (Lévy 1998, 30-31). Establishing the concept of a "global village," McLuhan (1962, 126) foresaw a world in which democracy was direct and absolute, with the whole of humanity participating in decisions of state. He saw electronic media

as eliminating all established social boundaries – the ultimate in social control (McLuhan 1969, 261). Meyrowitz agrees, describing how with increased access to information, “...thousands of followers can keep an even closer watch on one leader. The simple mathematics of hierarchy suggest the strong likelihood of an undermining of the pyramid of status in an electronic age” (Meyrowitz 1986, 110). Barry Schwartz takes an even stronger stand in praising the “...enormous potential for democratizing the decision-making apparatuses of society...capable of leaving nothing to the imaginative powers of fear, distrust, and false conception.” (Schwartz 1973, 4).

No medium offers greater potential for social control than television. Anyone who watched television regularly in the late 1980s will envision a frying egg upon hearing the phrase “this is your brain on drugs.” Similarly, inclusion in Oprah’s Book Club essentially guaranteed an author half a million sales (*The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 2002). According to Meyrowitz, “The widened public sphere gives nearly everyone a new (and relatively shared) perspective from which to view others and gain a reflected sense of self” (Meyrowitz 1986, 101). It is this strength that leads to accusations of television being a tool of homogenation wielded by hegemonic forces upon a passive audience (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 110). Kingsley Widmer claims “...the audience responds to media information in devotee fashion, piously and repetitively going through the normative reading.... All such rituals serve to confirm accepted and official views of reality, re-sanctifying the sanctified” (Widmer 1973, 30).

Kylo-Patrick Hart is wary of the power of media to “...influence and mold widely shared notions of deviance and social otherness,” indicating how the

reinforcement of negative stereotypes results in "...real (often detrimental) effects on real people" (Hart 2007, 1), both in those who are prejudiced against the "other" and those for whom the "otherness" is an internalized state. Counter to this argument for television as a force of reinforcing the status quo are scholars who explore how exposure to representations of others, whether idealized or not, allows individuals the ability to gain understanding of the lives of others; "...the patterns of conduct one needs to understand and cope with in others as well as of those patterns which one must apply to one's self," as Horton and Wohl explain (1956, 11). These founding authors believe this dramaturgical function to be among the most important aspects of PSI, predicting a "magic mirror" effect in which personae play their part "more skillfully and ideally than do the partners of the real world" allowing the viewer to absorb the moves made on screen and later "play his part as suavely and completely in imagination as he is unable to do in actuality" (Horton and Wohl 1956, 10).

Edward Schiappa, Peter Gregg, and Dean Hewes (2005) suggest that television is capable of reversing negative representations, extending Gordon Allport's Contact Hypothesis to show that contemporary programs showing homosexuals in a more positive light have been able to impact homophobic bias among individuals who have had no direct contact with homosexuals. It is this exposure, too, that is to be credited for television having been lauded for its ability to unite the nation through the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and to be a key to the success of the civil rights movement by showing the rest of the nation what life was like in the South for Americans of color (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 111). Perkinson credits television for inspiring

the nation to a higher morality, citing the medium's tendency to induce moral criticism, provoking feeling over thought. Thus, when the nation was introduced to Martin Luther King as he addressed the press regarding the Montgomery Bus Strike, featuring "...no legal argument for civil rights, no rational argument against the contradictions of segregation.... Television, with its bias towards encoding feelings and emotions, helped people to recast America's racial problems as a moral problem" (Perkinson 1991, 29-30). He concludes, "Television helped people recognize the moral inadequacies of the modern world – the injustices, the evils, the bad things it caused and condoned" (Perkinson 1991, 279). More contemporary examples of television attempting to exert positive social controls include the Lifetime Network's work raising funds and spreading information regarding breast cancer and the USA Network's recent Characters Unite initiative, aimed at fostering tolerance and respect between all Americans.

Pitfalls of Mediated Relationships

There are, of course, significant ways in which mediated relationships cannot replace traditional primary connections. From a distance, we cannot be cared for when ill, nor can we check to see whether someone is following advice we gave (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 126). A typical circle of friends, however, does not contain a large number who provide this level of intimate support. Between parasocial and hyperpersonal interactions, a person could count hundreds, perhaps thousands, of relationships, but Putnam (1995) views these new communities as "wider and shallower" than traditional

primary groups, a concern echoed by Jeffery McQuillen (2003, 617) and Postmes, et al. (1998, 692). McQuail comments upon the “centrifugal” tendency of media “...on the one hand leading to greater freedom, individualism, diversity, and modernity and, on the other, to isolation, anonymity, privatization, and vulnerability to manipulation” (McQuail 1985, 155), while Harrington and Bielby caution

An individual who engages in fragmented participation in many electronic idiocultures is immersed in multiple and only partially overlapping social bonds. Individually, each bond may be a limited source of intimacy and locus of trust, but what do they provide collectively? (Harrington and Bielby 1995, 624)

Several authors argue that media technologies have had deleterious effects upon our society, especially in regards to our ability to create and maintain interpersonal relationships. A fairly common concern among media ecology and interpersonal communication theorists is the potential for a pathological dependence upon mediated relationships to impair the ability to create or maintain F2F social contacts (Cerulo, et al., 1992; Downes and McMillan 2000; Giles 2002; Horton and Wohl 1956; McQuillen 2003). A more substantial accusation made by McQuillen is that the representation of idealized characters on television results in unrealistic expectations for us in our partners (McQuillen 2003, 618-619). The impact of media representation is a subject well founded in the literature of postcolonial, feminist, queer and other similar schools of thought (Shome and Hegde, 2002), and there is surely merit to the idea that the archetypes presented by television which foster parasocial relationships are liable for promoting Naomi Wolf’s “Beauty Myth” (1991) and other problematic representations,

such as the reproduction and reinforcement of stereotypes. Gitlin, though expressing agreement with this sentiment generally, cautions, "Scratch an advocate of any social position, and you're likely to find a content critic making not only semiotic claims about media bias but sociological claims about causes and effects" (Gitlin 2002, 139). Gergen turns this concern on its head, wondering "...not whether media relationships approximate the normal in their significance, but whether normal relationships can match the powers of artifice" (Gergen 1991, 57). Eco describes this apparent contradiction in which "the American imagination demands the real thing and, to attain it, must fabricate the absolute fake; where the boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness,' of *horror vacui*" (Eco 1986, 8).

Giles dilutes this argument, explaining that those exposed to these idealized representations and engaging in parasocial interactions are aware of the "imaginary" nature of parasocial relationships (Giles 2002, 286) and the mutually dramaturgical nature of hyperpersonal relationships. He also points out that PSI, though framed in this thesis as an interaction with television content, is an ancient construct, "catalogued...across cultures and through history" (Giles 2002, 287), referring to subjects of pre-electronic written text, folklore, and mythology, among others. Lévy agreed, noting "Imagination, memory, knowledge, and religion are the vectors of virtualization that have enabled us to leave this 'there' long before the appearance of computerization" (Lévy 1998, 28), as did Gergen, who cited "people's relationships with religious figures such as Jesus, Buddha, and Mohammed" (Gergen 1991, 56).

A Model for Comparing Relational Forms

Thus far, this thesis has addressed two types of mediated relationships, exploring their benefits and judging them against unmediated relationships. While many differences between hyperpersonal, parasocial, and unmediated relationships have been discussed, it remains to be seen which of these are most definitive – which are the differences that make a difference? Hyperpersonal and parasocial interactions both provide levels of convenience and consistency that obviate situational restrictions in space and time with somewhat predictable effects. It has been established that these mediated forms of interaction are similar to unmediated interactions in their psychological impacts (e.g. sense of identity, enduring bonds) upon individuals' sense of self or their relationships. It has also been shown that interpersonal tools we use in unmediated interactions are applicable to mediated interactions. If the core differences between these forms of interaction are not in their effects, then we must look towards their forms to find the source of distinction.

McLuhan deems television a cool medium (1994, 22), one in which many senses are engaged as a substantial amount of audio and visual information creates an immersive state. Viewers are bombarded with waves of light and sound, image and noise, leaving little capacity for the imagination as the mind is engaged in data processing. The information is social, as well as physical, providing a wealth of nonverbal cues such as inflection, posture, and hand gestures as well as undeniable physical truths regarding appearance, status, poise, and composure. Even more, a

viewer is privy to fictional characters' private thoughts via asides such as narrative monologues and hidden facial reactions revealed in close-ups. The capacity for a viewer to engage in reciprocal interaction, however, is limited and suffers from a long feedback loop, as described by Hall (1980, 129-130).

While McLuhan did not address the Internet, I believe he would see CMC as hot, as he did print (1994, 23). Users focus their attention on a single sense – vision. In order to function, users must process the limited information they have available to them, engaging their imagination in order to decode their communicative partners' messages to experience a hyperpersonal interaction. The reciprocal interactions build upon each other, which is required to form a hyperpersonal relationship.

As all of one's senses are engaged in a face-to-face encounter, this is certainly a cool medium, which is reinforced by McLuhan's claim that speech and dialogue are cool (ibid.). Every form of information, physical and social, is present here in full fidelity. Interactions are reciprocal with every nuanced nonverbal cue available for processing.

Considering these descriptions, there are three variables that emerge as describing the differences between mediated and unmediated interaction: hot/cool, information/imagination, and capacity for reciprocal interaction (CRI). McLuhan's theory of hot and cool media is problematic. There are inconsistencies in it, for one; he classifies the telephone as a cool medium, because the ear is given meager information, and yet this is a hyper-engagement of a single sense. Further, it does not account for advances in technology; at what point is the audio fidelity of a telephone significant

enough that it would no longer be considered providing “meager” information?

Finally, most of the descriptive power of this theory is duplicated in the Information (Cool) / Imagination (Hot) continuum.

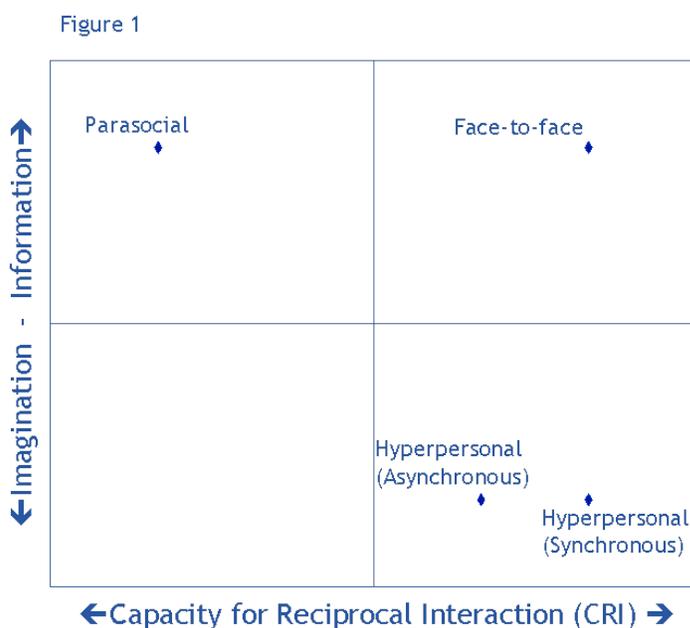
Excluding the hot/cool variable, we are left with two variables, each of which can be described as continuums. The first (Information/Imagination), from the amount of information the medium provides versus the amount of imaginative processing the medium requires of its users. CRI, the second continuum, represents a range of media allowance for high and low Capacity for Reciprocal Interaction.

These variables speak to the concerns of both media ecology and interpersonal communication. For those interested in media ecology, they address an epistemological question of how members of a society know each other and what their sources of knowledge are. A medium that has low levels of reciprocal interaction is an isolating one. This isolation is unquestionably physical but opens the question of whether it is isolating or supportive emotionally and psychologically, and how society is impacted by the presence or changes in use any form of interaction. For those interested in interpersonal communication, these variables address motivations for individuals to seek out connections that have the safety of limited confirming information rather than interactions that are candid, and what it means for individuals to desire interactions where responses are less imperative rather than those where immediate responses are expected.

Developing the model

Using these variables, we can attempt to establish a descriptive model of the defining qualities of relational forms, positioning each form at one point along each variable's continuum. Parasocial relationships with television personae, for example, are high in information, but low in CRI. Face-to-face relationships are high in both information and CRI. Hyperpersonal relationships differ from parasocial and F2F primarily in that they require a high level of imaginative interpretation; they are generally high in CRI, especially when the exchanges are synchronous. When hyperpersonal interactions are asynchronous, they lose some of their CRI.

As each relational form expresses a point on the continuums represented by these two variables, it is possible to imagine assigning them to binary coordinates upon an XY-scatter plot graph, as indicated below in Figure 1. In this graph, the X axis represents the CRI while the Y axis represents the amount of information available versus the amount of imagination needed to process limited information.



From this proposed descriptive model, we could see how each form of interaction relates to the others. Assuming the hypothesized positions indicated in figure 1 are directionally correct, this model describes hyperpersonal interactions as less information-intensive than parasocial or F2F and PSI as the only type of interaction among those mapped that has a low capacity for reciprocal interaction. F2F interactions are immediate in their response time; even if conversations are interrupted by long pauses, the nonverbal implications of those pauses speak volumes. On the other end of this continuum is parasocial interactions with a feedback loop that is generally quite long and narrow, having to process through the production of the content, the distribution of the show, the reception by the audience, the response in terms of audience ratings or other feedback, such as letter-writing, and the reception and processing of the feedback to the producers. In comparison, hyperpersonal interactions can be synchronous, happening essentially in “real time” (e.g. instant messaging), or asynchronous (e.g. e-mail), experiencing some delay between messages. While it is not impossible for asynchronous communication to take as long as the television feedback loop, this is atypical. Hyperpersonal interactions rely heavily upon the user’s imagination. Here the communicative partner must not only manage their own self-expression but also translate the respondent’s text to determine what truths are to be accepted, what to be assumed, and what to be disbelieved.

Intended Use

The primary use of this model is simply to provide a descriptive map of relational forms based upon the two criteria determined from the review in this thesis. It can also be used to answer questions regarding why people would use one form over another, why people might deem a particular form of interaction desirable in a particular context. As indicated by the model, based on the discussions in this work, we can see that people may use hyperpersonal interactions when they want a less concrete, more imaginary interaction. People who use hyperpersonal interactions may be more interested in creating situational encounters, rather than relying upon the corporeal world or television producers for their experiences. People who use PSI may be interested neither in being called upon for immediate, thoughtful responses nor in having to actively decode messages with limited information. They prefer to absorb the sights and sounds of a produced reality. People who seek F2F want the world as they find it; when they are unable to meet others in person due to situational conflicts (e.g. schedules, distance), the variables in this model may help them decide what aspects of an interaction would be more important if they were to use a mediated form.

This model is not intended to be limited to the forms of communication discussed in this thesis. Those who are interested in doing so should be able to reduce any relational form to the two variables described and plot them into the model, as indicated in Figure 2 where three relational forms have been added to the graph.



A relationship that was primarily realized through telephony, for example, might be located more towards the center of the Imagination-Information (Y) axis and towards a higher capacity for reciprocal interaction (X axis). An infatuation, such as a schoolyard crush, where there is little direct interaction and which Giles identifies as a form of parasocial interaction (Giles 2002, 287) might be located towards the middle of the Y axis, as it relies more on imagination than fact, while it is lower in CRI as direct interaction is avoided. As mentioned earlier, Horton and Strauss indicate parasocial interaction occurs between a speaker and a large audience, such exists between clergy and congregation. In these interactions, the laity is exposed to a stylized expression of the clergyperson's personality and most interactions are indirect, though one-on-one meetings are often possible, indicating that the relationship might be mapped just above the center of the imagination-information continuum and left of the CRI continuum.

Limitations and Future Research

As presented, this model is purely hypothetical, based solely upon the explorations of the literature that preceded its introduction. As such, its primary limitation is that it lacks confirming data. In order to confirm the hypothesized positions of each relational form, research needs to be performed. This research could take several forms.

A comparative textual analysis aimed at confirming the proposed model could show the number of messages exchanged, classifying direct and suggested messages in order to judge the levels of information versus imagination. In a hyperpersonal relationship, this could include the number of discrete ideational utterances, including emoticons and other uses of text indicative of hyperpersonal exchange. In F2F, this would have to include both verbal and nonverbal messages, discerning word-play such as innuendo, inflection, and use of puns as imaginal messages. These classifications would have to be considered in a textual analysis of PSI, as well, in addition to such acts as changing channels, recording programs, voting in reality programs, and visiting websites related to programs or personae. While this type of research would be most accurate, it would be complicated and expensive to complete.

A less intensive method would be to field surveys. This method would be problematic because of its reliance upon recall data. For example, people may not consider specific tools of PSI, such as exposure to internal monologues via voice-over or characters' private reactions, when they say that they receive more information from F2F interactions than from PSI.

This model as presented does not include many forms of interaction. Research as described above could reveal how text messaging differs from email or to what extent cybersex compares to less prurient forms of hyperpersonal interaction (or from a corporeal visit to a strip club). Having excluded minors from the review, it is also possible that research could show whether PSI among teens differs from children and adults in terms of the variables offered. It could also be seen whether relationships comprised of more equal levels of F2F and hyperpersonal interaction are located differently in the model – is there the same level of imagination needed between CMC partners who see each other regularly as those who have a primarily hyperpersonal relationship?

This model could be accused of being reductionistic; it is intended to be. There are many complex media theories available to those who seek them, such as Uses and Gratifications (Conway and Rubin 1991), which looks at several motivations for media use (including pass time, entertainment, information, escape, relaxation, and status enhancement). Giles's review of PSI literature (2002) referenced through this thesis describes several others. This model is intended to offer a simple understanding of the most intrinsic differences between relational forms, but future research could certainly be expanded to include variables in these other approaches.

Conclusion

Social and technological forces in postmodern society have made the increasing reliance upon mediated relationships a necessary truth. "For many individuals, mass media

represent the single largest source of daily interaction” (Cerulo, et al., 1992, 125).

Turning to media of every kind, though especially to television and the Internet, we are able to experience forms of contact and growth that some might be starved of without these sources. Certain aspects of mediated interactions are central to an ability to achieve the requirements for establishing a primary relationship and to overcome the deficits inherent in non-corporeal interactions. By providing interactions that are more convenient and more varied than those available to us in face-to-face interactions, parasocial and hyperpersonal relationships are capable of providing unique and, arguably, equally satisfying relationships.

It is important not to mistake the benefits of mediated relationships for a claim that unmediated relationships are outdated or unnecessary (Cerulo, et al. 1992, 126), as they provide unique comfort and warmth. However, assertions that mediated relationships are without benefit or present a threat to the continued vitality of humanity, our social structures, or individual capacity for face-to-face interaction are equally unsatisfactory (McQuillen 2003; Putnam 1995). Every form of relationship has its benefits, and every one – even face-to-face – has its drawbacks. As Postman made a point of saying, “...it is a mistake to suppose that any technological innovation has a one-sided effect. Every technology is both a burden and a blessing; not either-or, but this-and-that” (Postman 1993, 4-5).

The social and technological forces surrounding mediated interpersonal communication which have brought us to this point show no signs of slowing. This leaves me with little doubt that the lines between face-to-face and mediated exchange

will continue to blur in the face of continued advances in data storage and transmission and in fidelity of sound and image. In the face of this truth, it becomes increasingly important to continue to understand how media technologies impact our societal and interpersonal interactions.

Glossary of Acronyms

CMC / Computer Mediated Communication

CRI / Reciprocal Interaction

F2F / Face-to-face

MOO / MUD, Object Oriented

MUD / Multi-User Domain

POV / Predictive Outcome Value

PSI / Parasocial Interaction

SET / Social Exchange Theory

SIDE / Social Identity DE-individuation

SIP / Social Information Processing

SSP / Selective Self-Presentation (similar to Optimized Self-Presentation)

URT / Uncertainty Reduction Theory

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