Parasocial Interaction Theory Effects On TV Journalism Viewers

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When Carmen Harlan, a longtime news reporter and anchor at WDIV-TV (Channel 4) in Detroit retired in November 2016 after 38 years on the air, her work was celebrated and her departure was mourned. Harlan, a native Detroiter who had turned 63 one week before retirement, knew the city's history, and in many ways, was a notable part of that history. She had covered the city's and nation's biggest triumphs, scandals, tragedies and progressions – including when the city hosted Super Bowl XL, when the city's mayor admitted lying under oath and when both swearings-in took place for Barack Obama, the first black president of the United States of America. Harlan was part of viewers' daily routine and dinner conversation, and many of them woke up early year after year on Thanksgiving morning to watch her host "America's Thanksgiving Day Parade."

While other news reporters and anchors of yore took advantage of a point in time when they did not have non-compete clauses in their contracts as assurance they would not leave their stations for competitors, Harlan was one who stayed put – for nearly 40 years. She also stayed clear of her legacy being mired by unforgivable indignities like plagiarism, false reporting or other professional or personal misconduct that have plagued other longtime journalists, often leading to their firings or early retirements.

Comments on social media made it apparent that longtime viewers of Channel 4's evening newscast as well as young people expressing their desires to enter broadcast journalism respect, appreciate and admire Harlan; these viewers certainly had other news stations they could watch if they didn't favor her as an anchor. (In fact, over the years, viewers had no fewer than two other local news stations they could switch to if they did not like watching Harlan, who was the main anchor and the longest-serving anchor of Channel 4's evening newscast for the last four

decades.) The viewers who liked her most took to social media when her retirement was announced, expressing their gratitude, admiration and even distress and grief based on learning that they would no longer see her face on the local evening news. After all, for nearly 40 years, viewers had come to know the details of Harlan's life milestones, including when she became a mother and a grandmother. Even if they had never met her, many viewers still felt as if knew Harlan, had a personal relationship with her, and maybe even loved her.

This literature review presents research that demonstrates connections formed between news program viewers and viewer-facing news professionals (TV news reporters and anchors), against the background of parasocial interaction theory.

Parasocial Interaction Theory

Americans let strangers into their homes every day—through television. These strangers, both fictitious characters and real-life professionals who work in television, entertain, educate, influence, and inform viewers about the world (Rubin, 1986; Signorielli, 2004; Tsay & Bodine, 2012). Regular viewers of television programs have reported feeling connections to both fictitious characters and real people whom they see on television. According to Madison, Porter & Greule (2016), "when face-to-face interaction is not possible, we turn to functional alternatives to satisfy that need, with television being the preferred alternative in America" (p. 259). Whether viewers are watching actors on entertainment programming or real-life TV news reporters and anchors, chances are, the viewers do not have an interpersonal relationship with those people, which means reoccurring face-to-face interaction is not possible. Greenwood & Long (2009) studied the psychological predictors for media involvement. The authors suggested that viewers' engagement with entertainment media programs and characters increases salience for companionship. Their research reasoned that there is a "need to belong," especially

for "individuals who experience solitude as lonely or as a time when diversion is welcome may also be more likely to turn to media to cope" (p. 641). In the case of television personalities, viewers do not have ongoing interpersonal relationships with them, so empirical studies have tested parasocial interaction theory as a media effect on viewers. Television remains one of the most powerful and effective media platforms, and its effects are fertile ground for scholarly research. "Individuals often become deeply involved in media presentations and respond in some ways as if they were interacting with people known only through the media" (Tian & Hoffner, 2010, p. 250).

Depending on the discipline, parasocial interaction and parasocial relationship are used as interchangeable terms, with a nuance arguing that it is a parasocial relationship that leads to parasocial interaction; for the purpose of this literature review, the terms and their meanings are interchangeable. As initially explicated by Horton & Wohl (1956), parasocial interaction is a mediated, one-way relationship that substitutes actual interpersonal, face-to-face communication, and the relationship is one in which television viewers still feel is a real, existent connection. Pointing to Horton & Wohl's (1956) research, Rubin & McHugh (1987) explained that "a bond of intimacy is developed with media personalities through shared experiences existing only through viewing of the personality or persona over time. As time goes on, predictability about the character is increased. The character is reliable. The fan is loyal" (p. 280).

Facilitating parasocial interaction

The format of local morning-news programs, for example, has morphed over the years. What used to be no more than an hour of straight-news reporting without fluff is now a mix of reporting on light news and hard news mingled with lots of opinion and banter about the personal

lives of reporters and anchors. By design, these TV professionals are beautiful people with coveted features – such as a thin build, good-looking hair, fashionable wardrobe, and a crisp voice – that will captivate an audience. Rubin & McHugh (1987) argued that television networks and producers hire professionals with these features in an effort to maintain viewership. "They hope that audiences will form relationships with the characters, and audiences do" (Rubin & McHugh, 1987, p. 279).

As a backdrop for the attractive faces are attractive sets, from which anchors and reporters deliver the news, which also help cultivate parasocial interaction. Many stations have built sets that include comfortable couches, trendy chairs and tables (complete with stylish coffee mugs), and even functioning kitchens to set the background for connecting with audiences. These efforts are in place to humanize television personalities and to build up the idea that they are "regular people," just like the viewers, which makes viewers even more comfortable with inviting television personalities into their homes via television each day. WJBK-TV, a Fox affiliate in Detroit, touts a two-hour morning show called "The Nine" that which does not ignore hard news but carves out a large chunk of the show for more feature news, often bringing in guests to highlight events, health and wellness or other consumer-interest material. WDIV-TV (Channel 4), also in Detroit, has a show that is a mix of lifestyle, talk and entertainment called "Live in the D." It highlights positive happenings in nearby neighborhoods and communities. One of news stations' primary goals is to increase viewership, much in the same way that newspapers work to increase readership, news websites work to increase traffic to sites and news radio stations work to increase listenership. The more viewers, readers, clickers, and listeners that media have, the more they draw in advertisement dollars to financially support the journalism profession. Chic sets for newscasts are a useful background in establishing parasocial

relationships with viewers. When the anchors move from behind the desk to the comfortable couches, they seem more relaxed as they have conversations with each other about the day's news, including their opinions of it. Cohen (2004) suggested that these kinds of set-ups are necessary. "In order to draw viewers and keep them loyal, it was argued, television characters (both real and fictional) offer their viewers an opportunity to do more than simply watch; they offer simulated interaction" (p. 191).

According to Tukachinsky (2015), parasocial relationships have a positive effect on persuasion and facilitate how well an audience receives media personalities' messages. The author suggested that a viewer's genuine interest in a media personality leads to the viewer paying closer attention to what that media personality has to say, which Chory-Assad & Yanen's (2005) earlier research substantiated. Genuine interest in the personality's message can lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors in the viewer. Tian & Yoo (2015) drew attention to parasocial interaction and identification to understand regular viewers' response to health-related reality television shows. They justified their study of health communication research in this manner based on the rise of reality television shows, and they validate their study of audience responses to the reality show *The Biggest Loser* because well over half of American adults are overweight or obese. The results of the Tian & Yoo's (2015) study showed that regular viewers of *The Biggest Loser* are so engaged in the show that they develop strong connections with the characters. Oftentimes, these parasocial relationships are even closer than the relationships the viewers have with their real-life friends. Furthermore, these parasocial relationships increase celebrity identification (or viewers' feelings of having something in common with the celebrities), which has a positive effect on the viewers' acceptance of messages from celebrities on the shows. Tian & Yoo's (2015) study showed that regular viewers of *The Biggest Loser*

identified with the celebrities and bought into the celebrities' message that exercise is a good thing. However, the study also showed that audiences view weight as a personal struggle – plagued with special external factors – that affect their ability to exercise the way the celebrities do. Finally, even though viewers recognize that exercise is healthy, they don't always follow through on actually doing it.

Audience attention on appearance

Across genres, television viewers are drawn to people and things they find attractive. In an examination of attachment style and interpersonal engagement with, specifically, female TV stars, Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long (2008) pointed to the hesitation television viewers feel to admit feeling close to a media icon. However, the presence of openness on social media that viewers of various ages expressed about television anchor Carmen Harlan's retirement suggests otherwise. While pointing to the trouble young people have with separating ideas of physical attractiveness from general appeal and likeability, Greenwood, Pietromonaco, & Long (2008) use a two-step questionnaire study that acknowledged that adults also have trouble disassociating physical attractiveness, general appeal, and likeability, pointing to research that "suggests that young women may consider the physical attractiveness of their favorite female media personas part and parcel of their overall affinity for that character" (p. 392).

On social media, Harlan's female fans often referenced her appearance, including her long hair, trademark freckles and her overall style. Her coworkers did the same in their collaborative, three-minute tribute music video that featured her longtime co-anchor's reworked words to "My Girl," a Motown-hit by The Temptations, with members of the station's staff singing and dancing to celebrate her work over the years. The video, a professional production that included images from her personal and work life, emphasized the potential for parasocial

interaction as it highlighted things Detroiters related to, such as Harlan's love for coney dogs, Vernors and Faygo soft drinks, and Better Made Potato Chips. She was referred to in the video as "an institution" like Belle Isle Park, the Detroit Institute of Arts Museum, and of course, Motown. "When the world is crazy, she's amazing grace. [Oh, yeah!] I know it'll be all right when I see her face. [Oh yeah!] That's why I say, 'I watch Carmen every day—except Friday, Friday, Friday. She don't work on Fridays" (Scillian, 2016).

Groomed to interact

Research suggested that television punctuates all parts of a lifetime – from infanthood until death (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Signorielli, 2004; Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2015). In an examination of parasocial break-up from favorite television characters, Cohen (2004) notes that the way adults attach to others stems from infanthood. For infants and children, television may be a baby sitter – albeit one that can has educational programming – for busy or uninvolved parents. For teens, television may be more of a form of entertainment or escape. For adults, television entertains, educates, influences and informs; it does the same for the most elderly viewers, who often use television as a companion in end-of-life experiences. Chory-Assad & Yanen (2005) examined hopelessness and loneliness as predictors of older adults' involvement with favorite television performers, which the authors identified as both fictional characters and real-life media personalities. The authors' findings contradicted previous research that demonstrated that older viewers preferred non-fictional programming instead of contemporary sitcoms and dramas.

Critiquing Parasocial Interaction to Future Research

Critics have argued that parasocial interaction theory lacks necessary specificity. The theory, as Horton & Wohl (1956) conceptualized and as scholars have since further operationalized, has not identified how long it takes for a parasocial relationship to be established. According to Horvath (2004), even cultivation theory, which came some 30 years after Horton & Wohl's initial parasocial interaction theory research, has operationalized how long it takes viewers' perceptions of the world to be cultivated through television-watching. Future research could add to parasocial interaction theory research by examining how long it takes for viewers to establish such a connection with fictitious characters and television personalities.

Though cultivation theory is not used as a primary model of research for this literature review, that theory is a useful peripheral framework (Kim & Rubin, 1997) to help establish specific parameters in terms of assessing the amount of time viewers spend watching television personalities, in an effort to help pinpoint when actual parasocial interaction takes place. The body of research concerning cultivation theory would benefit from a study that reassesses what it means to be a light viewer, medium viewer or heavy viewer of television. Decades after television has become a staple in U.S. homes, access to television has ballooned and its reach has extended far beyond the one shared black-and-white television set per household that only featured programming for a set number of hours per day. Now, viewers can watch several channels, 24 hours a day, and with the right technology, they can watch more than one show at one time and multitask while doing it. Other technological advances can interfere with the amount of attention viewers actually give to television while "watching" it, which also expands opportunities for research examining whether multitasking has diluted media effects.

Furthermore, as cultivation theory is essentially a television-based theory, the body of research needs to expand more to include the effects of television when it is viewed on platforms other than traditional television sets, i.e., mobile devices and computers.

Making connections outside of television

Many viewers consider journalists to be celebrities in their own right. According to Patterson and Wilkins (2014), "Journalists—especially bloggers—have become sources for much want-to-know information. A number of media outlets have been founded on the public's desires to know about celebrities, criminals, and even common folk" (p. 118). That being said, television personalities are no exception to being categorized under people the public want to know about. For some viewers, seeing television personalities outside of the television has the same effect as children seeing their teachers out in the world after learning hours. There's a bit of shock and excitement on behalf of the viewer or children that the person on television or the classroom teacher does the same things they do outside of work and learning hours. Viewers may want to talk to the television personality or take a photo with the journalist or of the journalist to be posted on social media later as proof they met the person—the same (or more so) as the viewer might do if they saw a friend in public. And, of course, the viewer is likely to "at" the television personality on social media, in hopes the journalist would see, share or respond to the viewer's post.

Many news organizations have social media guidelines and expectations for their employees; it's a fair supposition that most television personalities have a presence on social media. (That certainly is the case for reporters and anchors working at news stations in Detroit, and it certainly is the case for viewer-facing journalists for syndicated news broadcasts, even if a team of other employees moderates that social media presence.) Organizations placing

importance on social media engagement and interaction with audiences is in line with research

that shows stakeholders in companies also find it to be important, and in many cases, expected.

Tsai & Men's (2016) empirical analysis draws connections to the outcomes of CEOs'

communication styles and parasocial interaction on social networking sites as it relates to public

relationships and public advocacy that organizations have with stakeholders. Though the findings

of their analysis focused on the highest-ranking employees of an organization, their conclusions

supported the idea that every company is a social media company because of the "paradigm shift

from public relations to public engagement" (Tsai & Men, 2016, p. 2). The push is strong for

stakeholders in a company (viewers) to feel as if company employees (television personalities)

are accessible, personal and down-to-earth in their interactions on social networking sites;

parasocial interaction theory leads to beliefs among viewers that television personalities also

would act similarly in person. Furthermore, research showed that parasocial interaction theory

leads viewers to actually expect such interactions with television personalities. The effects of

parasocial interaction are so strong that viewers may assume television personalities are as

personable off-screen are they are on-screen. Potter (1988) et al. suggested that people outside of

the journalism profession have trouble separating fact from fiction on television. In a textual

analysis of more than 90 reviews, interviews and articles about one specific entertainment

program, HBO series *The Newsroom*, Koliska & Eckert (2015) focused on the influence of

television shows about journalists. The authors pointed to the public's inability to separate fact

from fiction among an industry's actual practices when viewing television. "The public does not

or cannot always distinguish between myths and practices; it only perceives the myth" (Koliska

& Eckert, 2015, p. 753).

Future Research

The number of professional journalists in the traditional sense is experiencing attrition, and it has been for at least the last 10 years. The most recent statistic about the number of practitioners working in the field of journalism as reporters, correspondents or broadcast news analysts puts the number at 54,000 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Outside of the field, popularity of knowing about the profession seems to be growing, as evident by the number of entertainment television shows featuring characters working as journalists in main roles or supporting roles. As such, examination the media effects of viewers seeing journalists and journalism on television and the overall body of scholarly literature and scholarly work concerning the subject area has increased attention from communication scholars (Hanitzsch, Löffelholz, & Weaver, 2005). Television journalists get new chances, every day, all day, to make an impression on audiences. That is why the scholarly research opportunities about parasocial interaction theory are fertile ground. Future research could examine whether parasocial interaction among viewers of entertainment programming featuring journalists has an effect on credibility of real-life journalists in all sectors of the profession – including print journalism and online journalism. The rationale behind studying concentrations within the profession separately is to identify any potential differences in how receivers (readers and viewers) get messages from senders (print journalists and broadcast journalists), especially because print journalism does not have what is presumably the advantage of combined visual and auditory information (Shapiro & Chock, 2004).

Quick (2009) applied cultivation theory, a suitable peripheral theory for parasocial interaction theory, to examine how heavy viewers of the primetime medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* perceive real-life doctors. In the study, as viewers watched 32 episodes of *Grey's Anatomy*, the credibility of the show among them grew. Though the credibility of the show

among viewers did not directly affect how the viewers perceived courageousness in real-world doctors, credibility and courageousness were positively associated. Furthermore, the empirical evidence positively linked doctor courageousness to patient satisfaction. Quick (2009) used a single program to advance the body of scholarly media effects research.

Studies have been conducted about how other media, namely Twitter, affected how users evaluate journalists' credibility (Jahng & Littau, 2016), but the research focused on social cues. The 156 participants in Jahng's & Littau's (2016) study were college students taking an introductory communication and psychology course; most of them were female, and the average age of participants was 19.8. An extension of study could gather empirical evidence of how audiences who have established parasocial relationship with journalists on social media come to evaluate those journalists' credibility. Furthermore, future research ideas also could attach to the result of Jahng's and Littau's (2016) study that journalists with high interactivity were evaluated to be more credible. A journalist's interactivity on social media can hint at technical competence, but at the risk of such interactivity stemming from oversaturation or over-sharing of the content *that* journalist produces, a deeper content analysis of information-sharing habits of so-called credible journalists on social media would be interesting.

Research examining parasocial interaction for viewers of reality television also should carve out a bigger niche in scholarly research. In Tian & Yoo (2015), audience reaction to *The Biggest Loser* supported that entertainment media content can have positive outcomes. So, further research of parasocial interaction could focus on other entertainment media content that can have positive outcomes, including children's shows and cartoons. These shows often have storylines and messages that are beyond the scope of understanding for their first-level target audience – children. Content producers seem to do this because adults often watch children's

shows and cartoons with their children and advanced storylines and messages are ways to increase entertainment value for adults. It also could be hypothesized that entertainment media content that caters to both children and adults increases family time because adults may be more likely to sit down with their children to watch these shows instead of allowing the shows to babysit their children. That being said, there is room to expand literature about the effects of parasocial interaction among adults watching shows supposedly designed for children.

Conclusion

Gerbner & Gross (1976) asserted that "television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is, in a word, enculturation" (p. 175). To this day, television is still arguably the most powerful form of media based on that it is free and accessible, does not require much skill to experience, and punctuates all parts of a viewer's lifetime. Television is an indoctrinator for how viewers come to learn about different careers and also influences how they come to believe the real-life people in those careers to be. Research showed that as viewers watch entertainment programming featuring fictitious journalists as well as real-life television news personalities, viewers form opinions how journalists are in real-life, often forming parasocial relationships with the people they see in these roles on television. The social significance of studying the parasocial interaction that takes place when viewers watch television news cannot be disputed. This literature review synthesized research that demonstrates how networks facilitate these kinds of relationships with viewers based on whom networks hire to deliver newscasts as well as how networks construct sets that increase viewers' comfort levels with news reporters and anchors.

Using books and scholarly, peer-reviewed articles from the some of the most well-

respected communications research and psychology research journals in the world, this literature review drew upon studies that demonstrate the power of parasocial interaction and discussed potential for future research, adding to parasocial interaction literature. It employed parasocial interaction as the primary model for understanding how viewers come to like and even love their favorite television personalities. By means of highlighting viewer reaction to the retirement of a longtime news reporter and anchor at a major television news station in Detroit, after 38 years on the air, this literature review explained how parasocial relationships with a television personality are formed over time, as evident by the public congratulatory messages and public admissions of being in mourning after Carmen Harlan's retirement announcement. Most of the viewers had never met her and did not have an ongoing relationship with her, but they still felt as if they knew her, which demonstrates parasocial interaction. This literature review presented research that suggests that connections are formed between news program viewers and the viewer-facing news professionals (TV news reporters and anchors), meeting its goal to add to the understanding of parasocial interaction as a media effect.

Furthermore, it addressed the opportunity for future research that uses parasocial interaction as a primary model for understanding how television news viewers establish a connection with the personalities they welcome into their homes via television each day. While the journalism profession has shrunk in the last decade, there is still room to expand scholarly research that studies the profession, and not just from a communications research standpoint. This literature review featured information from communications research as well as sociology and psychology research journals. While fewer practitioners may be working in broadcast journalism than a decade ago, there are still tens of thousands delivering news on a local, national and international level. Thanks to social media carving out new niches within

communication, journalism education is finding even more niches to teach students interested in pursuing journalism as a major in post-secondary education. On the entertainment front, a number of entertainment television shows and movies continue to feature communications professionals and journalists in main roles or supporting roles, including shows that are currently on-air such as ABC's *Black-ish*, BET's *Being Mary Jane*, and Netflix's *House of Cards*, all of which are still in production. The more Hollywood continues to pay attention the journalism profession, the more communication scholars should continue to study it.

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