

Soap Operas and the History of Fan Discussion

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This essay examines the ways in which fans have found ways to express themselves and form communities surrounding soap opera texts, starting with one-on-one localized discussions with fans and through more proactive responses such as fan mail and fan clubs. The study also focuses on the lack of coverage on soaps and room for publishing the voices of soap opera fans in the popular press and how the soap opera press eventually filled that niche. It concludes with an in-depth look at online fan communities surrounding soap operas and how they have been and might be understood, encouraging an emphasis on valuing the *vernacular theory* of the fan community and paying more attention to the various ways that online fans interact with the text and one another.

Soap Opera and Fan Discussion

Soaps do not exist in a vacuum, and the show's daily texts can only be completely understood in the context of the community of fans surrounding them. Instead of imagining the audience as a passive sea of eyeballs measured through *impressions*, this approach views soap operas as the central piece and catalyst for a social network of fans. Acting as dynamic social texts, soap operas are created as much by the audience that debates, critiques, and interprets them than through the production team itself.¹ This collective attribution of meaning has been proven to be a strong motivation for viewing the show, whether those discussions take place in conversations between families while the show is on, post-"story" phone calls among friends and relatives, or else at the workplace or on soaps discussion boards. The changing ways that

¹ The power of the reader is not new ground. For instance, see Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen* 5-6 (1967). While Barthes focuses on the solitary reader's ability to "author" the text, the social connectivity of today's media landscape enables much more widespread meaning-making from the audience.

viewers conceive their relationships with these shows creates a shift in soap opera texts are conceived, produced, and received. The public discussions now facilitated by Internet discussion leads not only to new ways for fans to connect but also a new dynamic between consumer and producer that has impacted and could further substantially change the ways in which soap operas operate.

Soaps have always had a close correlation with the daily lives of their viewers. Watching the drama of people's personal lives unfold on a daily basis was seen as a discourse with housewives, inviting them to perceive the characters first on radio and later on television serial dramas as friends and relatives whose daily lives one was privy to. Soaps were driven not just by the actions of characters but also by the reaction to those events as news spreads across the social connections on a show. Much of the scholarship about soap operas has focused on this intended dialogue between the show and the viewer and the intimacy that the visual image accords the viewer with characters. For instance, Bernard Timberg posits that the direct involvement audience members (himself included) feel when watching soaps is aided by the way the episode is filmed, "making (viewers) feel somehow complicit in the ebb and flow of relationships and emotions."²

This degree of intimacy and connectedness may have indeed caused soaps characters to feel somehow more "real" than those on other shows, and anecdotal evidence has always pointed toward that being the case. One of my high school teachers recalled visiting with her mother while she was on the phone with an aunt one day, and listening in horror as her mother described a bad situation that one of their friends was going through. Only later did she realize that it

² Timberg, Bernard, "The Rhetoric of the Camera in Television Soap Opera," *Television: The Critical View*, Fourth Edition, Ed. Horace Newcomb, New York: Oxford UP, 1987, 164-178, 64. Also published in *Journal of American Culture* 6.3, 1983, 76-81.

wasn't a story about someone who lived on their block but rather about one of the Lowells on *As the World Turns*. The lack of documentation about the power of social connectedness in soaps at this point is not surprising because these discussions happened informally. Even as the channels through which fans can discuss soaps have changed, this personal interaction with family and friends over the text of the show that was at the heart of the social connections surrounding soaps texts from the beginning of the genre will not likely change, as a more recent essay by Elaine Rapping demonstrates.³ Because social connections around soaps were limited to these direct interpersonal relationships in the earliest days of soaps viewing, soap opera characters may have seemed particularly localized. These characters may have seemed like members of the community or the family, and these stories may very well have seemed to be a personal possession of a small number of viewers who conversed about them, without a wider forum of discussion for these shows.

Fan Clubs and Fan Letters

The earliest attempts at official connection for soaps, not surprisingly, came through letter writing to the network and fan clubs. I have found little information about the history of fan clubs, and my correspondence with the current president of both the *As the World Turns* and *Guiding Light* official fan clubs emphasized that there had not been an institutional history passed down and that she did not know much about the history of the organization prior to her taking over in 1999.⁴ No matter how long this “official” fan club has been in operation, evidence indicates that various fan clubs have existed around these shows for some time. The current *ATWT* Fan Club hosts an annual luncheon with various current and former cast members

³ Rapping, Elaine, “Daytime Utopias: If You Lived in Pine Valley, You’d Be Home,” *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, Ed. Henry Jenkins III, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2002, 47-66.

⁴ Schulman, Mindi, personal e-mail correspondence, 19 December 2006.

and provides members with pen pal lists and various documents about the current creative team behind the show and the names and birthdays of current actors.⁵ The fan club also provides two resources to fans that echo the earliest powers that fans employed: a list of people to contact in the press in reaction to soaps,⁶ as well as a list of the executive producer, head writer, and contacts for both Procter & Gamble Productions/TeleVest Daytime Programs and the Senior Vice-President of CBS Daytime, all of whom fans might be interested in sending praise or (more likely) complaints.⁷

While more historical evidence exists as to fan behavior in writing soap producers and the networks directly, many of the accounts are anecdotal and perhaps colored by the biases of unreliable narrators such as actors themselves, or else historical claims that may nor may not be able to be directly substantiated. For *As the World Turns*, the famous incident that drove a significant amount of fan letters to the show involved what the official historian for the show labeled “the first soap supercouple before the phrase was even coined,” the relationship between Jeff Baker and Penny Hughes in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁸ *ATWT* historian Julie Poll, in fact, directly attributes *As the World Turns*’ rise to the tops of soaps ratings (where it would reside from 1958 until 1978) as being “propelled” by the romance of these two characters.⁹ At the height of popularity for this couple, the actor who portrayed Jeff Baker opted to leave the show, and his character was quickly written off with a car crash. According to a retrospective on

⁵ “Join the Official *As the World Turns* Fan Club Today!” The Official *As the World Turns* Fan Club, <http://www.officialatwtfanclub.com/join.html>.

⁶ “Let the Magazines Know What You Think!” The Official *As the World Turns* Fan Club, <http://www.officialatwtfanclub.com/magazines.html>.

⁷ “Where to Write *As the World Turns*, The Official *As the World Turns* Fan Club, <http://www.officialatwtfanclub.com/contact.html>.

⁸ Poll, Julie, “Young Love, First Love: Penny and Jeff,” *As the World Turns: The Complete Family Scrapbook*, Los Angeles: General Publishing Group, 1996, 215.

⁹ Ibid.

the show's 50th anniversary from *TelevisionWeek*, "the on-and-off love story of Penny and Jeff so captivated the nation that CBS was deluged with protest letters when Jeff was killed."¹⁰ The Wikipedia entry on *As the World Turns* points out that *TV Guide* considered the death of Jeff Baker "the car accident that shook the nation," and the event was listed among its 100 most shocking events in TV history.¹¹

The only direct historical evidence I tracked down from the time was an August 1962 *Time* article on the death of Jeff Baker.¹² The author writes that the actor, Mark Rydell, had been "held to the show by salary and sentiment (\$50,000 and 5,000 fan letters a year)" but that his aspirations to work in primetime television had caused continued problems for those scripting the show who planned his death.¹³ A letter then appeared two weeks later in *Time* responding to the article, detailing how what the reader identifies as "our group" "had a reception on Penny and Jeff's wedding day" and was subsequently "suitably attired in black to watch *As the World Turns* on the day Jeff died."¹⁴ The backlash from the audience has become part of soaps—and television—lore, although it is somewhat hard to distinguish the actual response from the hyperbole generated by the industry and fans might to promote the width and depth of soap opera fandom.

Even harder to distinguish is how much hyperbole is involved in actor accounts of fan interaction. While the show's producers have long been the target of fan mail protesting and

¹⁰ Waldman, Allison J., "'World' Turns 50: 'Digital Comfort Food,'" *TelevisionWeek*, 27 March 2006.

¹¹ "History of *As the World Turns* (1960-1969), Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_As_the_World_Turns_\(1960-1969\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_As_the_World_Turns_(1960-1969)).

¹² "Murder Necessitated," *Time*, 24 August 1962, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,896534,00.html>.

¹³ *Ibid.* Rydell went on to be an actor and director on television and in films.

¹⁴ Hayes, Jean (from Oklahoma City), "Watchful Waking," *Time*, 07 September 1962, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,870081-2,00.html>.

complaining about certain creative decisions or directions, there has been reported an equally—or perhaps more—ardent collection of fan mail for actors, who are the most recognizable components of the show for fans. *As the World Turns*' Eileen Fulton, who has played the character of Lisa for about 45 years now, provides a typical account of what actors remember most and like to tell others about their fan mail. She claims that, shortly after she began with the show in 1960, “it wasn't long before viewers started calling in and sending telegrams from all over the country, declaring, ‘If that bitch Lisa marries Bob I'll never watch your show again. I can't stand that conniving little tramp. She's wrong for the Hughes family. Stop her!’”¹⁵

Even more dubious than her claims about delusional fans over the years is the hyperbole involved in Fulton's description of fan reaction when she left the show for brief periods of time. At one point, another actress temporarily replaced her. “Phone calls started coming through by the hundreds and letters and telegrams by the thousands, begging for the return of the *real* Lisa. Even the newspapers picked up on it.”¹⁶ In an earlier attempt to provide an insider's account of the business, Madeleine and David Rounds describe fan reactions to cancelled or preempted shows, claiming that CBS got “at least 35,000 letters” protesting the cancellation of some of its least popular daytime shows.¹⁷ “The cancellation of a day's episode in order to show some national event—such as an Apollo launching, a presidential funeral, or a Senate hearing—brings an avalanche of protest mail.”¹⁸ However, Edmondson and Rounds claim that the majority of

¹⁵ Fulton, Eileen, with Desmond Atholl and Michael Cherikinian, *As My World Still Turns: The Uncensored Memoirs of America's Soap Opera Queen*, New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995, x.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁷ Edmondson, Madeleine and David Rounds, *The Soaps: Daytime Serials of Radio and TV*, New York: Stein and Day, 1973, 195.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

mail received by the networks “could be classified as morality mail. Almost anything offends someone, and soap watchers are quick to complain.”¹⁹

Each of these accounts was either written by people within the industry or dependant upon numbers quoted by the industry. One would guess these authors may take some degree of creative license to exaggerate the quantity and quality of this viewer passion in order to bolster their own stories and to make more emphatic statements about the emotions that soap opera texts generate. Nevertheless, whether these accounts are completely accurate or not, the fact remains that fan mail has long been a viable and popular form of interaction between producers and consumers in the soap opera industry.

In his examination of the soap opera industry in the early 1980s, Peter Buckman writes about the types of comments that are sent into shows for the producers to read, such as comments sent to *Guiding Light* in 1982, focusing on the fact that the show had slipped to ninth place in the ratings (then five from the bottom). “Do you want to know the reason – Boring!! *GL*, you are boring, boring, boring. The writers must be tapped out.”²⁰ Buckman points out that fan letters are often sent to producers to prove the audience’s self-awareness and to attempt to assert some power over the current direction of the show, writing, “The viewers have, if you like, a political sense of their own power, and its limitations. They know that it is on their loyalty that the programme makers rely – and yet [. . .] the older viewers at least are aware that they are not a strong enough market force to have a great influence on the producers.”²¹ Elana Levine describes the more recent handling of fan mail for *General Hospital* on ABC, pointing out that the show’s main way to handle understanding fan responses in the late 1990s, in addition to focus groups,

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Buckman, Peter, *All for Love: A Study in Soap Opera*, Salem, NH: Salem House, 1985 (first published in 1984 in the UK), 188.

²¹ Ibid., 189.

was to have writers' assistants and student interns group the mail and make appropriate reports on that fan response.²² Fan mail is considered negative if the audience member says he or she will quit watching the show, but fan mail is considered positive even if it is criticism when the viewer does not threaten to quit watching. Levine writes:

While the system in place to handle audience response is thorough and efficient, it does not really account for most viewers' perspectives, as the letters must be neatly classified into positive or negative categories and the actual words of audience members are only rarely seen by anyone higher in the chain of command than a writer's assistant.²³

Fulton writes, "Most soap viewers don't realize how much power they have. Enough letters, telegrams, and phone calls can kill characters and story lines or turn a temporary part (like Lisa) into a long-term love affair."²⁴ While she—like Edmondson and Rounds—may be inclined to exaggerate and—in Fulton's case—to concentrate on some of her stranger fan interactions over the years, her point about the power that fandom can yield when organized is an important component of soaps history. The problem of a disconnect in the direction of the creative team and the most common directions desired by fans can often be overcome when fans find ways to articulate themselves in ways that the shows' producers understand. However, these floods of letters were generally not collective action, as there were few ways for soaps fans to organize themselves. As Buckman emphasizes, producers often ignore that physical fan mail,

²² It is important to note that this process was a case study of one particular time period for one specific show. While I am using it here as a point of comparison as to how soap opera fan letters are received and responded to, this is not necessarily representative of the industry's handling of fan mail in general.

²³ Levine, Elana, "Toward a Paradigm for Media Production Research: Behind the Scenes at *General Hospital*," *Television: The Critical View*, Seventh Edition, Ed. Horace Newcomb, New York: Oxford UP, 2007, 133-149,146. Originally published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 18.1 (March 2001), 66-82.

²⁴ Fulton, Eileen, with Desmond Atholl and Michael Cherikinian, *As My World Still Turns: The Uncensored Memoirs of America's Soap Opera Queen*, New York: Birch Lane Press, 1995, 67.

perhaps because of its lack of collective engagement. It may be easier to dismiss the singular desires of fans rather than a large and social collective action.

The Soap Opera Press

One factor that changed the face of the way soap operas relate to their fans is the creation of the soap opera press. While soaps were often covered in some degree by *TV Guide* and certain big events might be mentioned in newspapers or magazines, daytime—despite its visibility and popularity—was left behind, even as primetime television programming was granted an increasing amount of attention from serious critics. While there is much less scholarly attention given to the artistry of soaps as compared to the best primetime has to offer, there is also much less serious consideration of soaps in the popular press. This niche is filled somewhat by magazines focusing particularly on soaps that are now a staple of checkout lines in grocery stores. Whereas previous forms of fan communication involved private exchanges (local discussions, fan mail, and fan clubs) and most publications did not regularly report or include reader letters about soap operas, soap opera magazines provided a new forum in which the reception of soap operas could become texts themselves, through official industry news and behind-the-scenes information, official columnists, and fan letters and polls.

Soap Opera Digest was launched in November 1975 as a monthly magazine. In addition to providing a chance for soap fans to publish their views and read one another's opinions, as well as critics examining their favorite shows, *SOD* created an annual set of awards, similar to the Daytime Emmy Awards, for daytime serial dramas in 1977. The launch of the magazine also coincides with the height of soaps popularity, when shows switched from a live format to a taped program (thus increasing the quality and reliability of acting and reducing the chance for obvious

production errors) and an expansion from 30 minutes to one hour that also caused a doubling of most casts.

SOD became bi-weekly in 1979. A sister publication, *Soap Opera Weekly*, debuted in 1989 as a weekly companion to *SOD*. In 1997, *SOD* became a weekly publication as well. The intent of *SOW* when the magazine was first launched, according to fans, was to provide a more nuanced and critical examination of soap opera texts, relying less on an analysis of hair, makeup, style, and the physical attributes of actors and more on analysis and commentary.²⁵ However, that focus gradually shifted so that much of the material in both *SOD* and *SOW* is similar.

While several companies have owned the magazines, Primedia took over the publications in 2000. According to *SOW*'s Wikipedia page, the magazine shifted its focus in 2000 "to include coverage of prime-time drama and reality series with soap themes and continuing storylines."²⁶ In the first half of 2006, *SOD* was listed with a total circulation of 527,925, with 345,640 subscribers and 182,285 newsstand single copy sales, the 58th most popular magazine on the newsstand. *SOW* was listed with a circulation of 239,704, with 101,386 subscribers and 138,318 newsstand single copy sales, the 82nd most popular magazine on the stand.²⁷ These numbers make them the 10th and 11th most popular weekly magazines on the newsstand, behind the various tabloids, *Woman's World*, and *TV Guide*.²⁸ According to The Millard Group, *SOD*'s

²⁵ Liccardo, Lynn, e-mail correspondence, 14 December 2005, Liccardo formerly published in the magazine on occasion before its gradual shift to a less serious critical engagement with soap opera texts.

²⁶ "Soap Opera Weekly," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soap_Opera_Weekly.

²⁷ "Top 100 ABC Magazines by Average Single Copy Sales," Magazine Publishers of America Web site, http://www.magazine.org/circulation/circulation_trends_and_magazine_handbook/18424.cfm.

²⁸ This information was part of a media kit by *USA Today* highlighting the performance of *Sports Weekly* and listed ABC Fas-Fax from 30 June 2006 as its source. See "Weekly Magazines," *USA Today* Web Site, http://www.usatoday.com/media_kit/sports_weekly/au_highest_in_newsstand_sales.htm.

subscribers are 83 percent female and 17 percent male with the median age of 50 and median household income of \$38,000.²⁹ *SOW*'s subscribers are listed as 84 percent female and 16 percent male with an average age of 50.³⁰ The shift in using median age in one list and average age in the other may indicate a desire to have the lowest age listed possible.

Competitor Bauer Publishing runs its own weekly magazine called *Soaps In Depth*, which focuses on ABC soap operas one week and CBS the next. An April 2006 press release touted 71,405 subscribers for *CBS Soaps In Depth* and 79,665 subscribers for *ABC Soaps In Depth*.³¹ In the first half of 2006, the ABC version was listed as having 272,672 verified weekly readers, with 60,760 verified subscribers and 211,912 newsstand sales, while the CBS version has 249,514 verified weekly readers, with 56,220 verified subscribers and 193,294 newsstand sales, the 53rd and 57th most popular magazines on the newsstand.³² These magazines have a much higher readership than their subscriptions and newsstand sales would indicate, since many people flip through the issues while in the store without ever purchasing it, trying to find the few relevant pages about their soap in particular.

The soap opera press provides enough critical information for fans to consider them relevant and still play a part in the modern interactions between audience members and the show's creative and marketing staff. However, one cannot take lightly the impact that these

²⁹ "Soap Opera Digest," The Millard Group Web site, http://www.millard.com/wb/Primedia/prime_soapd.htm.

³⁰ "Soap Opera Weekly," The Millard Group Web site, http://www.millard.com/wb/Primedia/prime_soapw.htm.

³¹ "Worldata Awarded Exclusive List Management of: Bauer Publishing: Over 800,000 Consumer Magazine Subscribers!" Worldata press release, 26 April 2006, <http://www.worldata.com/wdnet8/articles/bauerpublishing.htm>. Bauer also publishes such supermarket line staples as *Woman's World*, *Life & Style Weekly*, and *In Touch*.

³² This information was part of a media kit by *USA Today* highlighting the performance of *Sports Weekly* and listed ABC Fas-Fax from 30 June 2006 as its source. See "Weekly Magazines," *USA Today* Web Site, http://www.usatoday.com/media_kit/sports_weekly/au_highest_in_newsstand_sales.htm.

publications have served over the past three decades, even if there is a lack of critical engagement in these weekly publications. The fact that they are the one source that focuses on American soap operas on a consistent basis drives a lot of fan interest in what the magazines include and provides a space through which the shows can send news to fans through interviews and scoops; in return, fans have been able to have their opinions expressed on a national stage, through polls and published letters. These publications might not have completely satisfied the fan community's interest in "official" and fan-produced media about the soap opera industry, but they provided the first forum for such writing nonetheless.

Web-Based Communication Among Soaps Fans

While these previous modes of communication lacked the potential for a large community of fans to build around daily discussion of texts, the Internet created a space where the one-on-one interpersonal model of fan discussion that empowered soap opera viewing could take place on a wider scale. With a forum for a concentrated discussion that was public, the Internet empowered fans with new ways to organize themselves to get the attention of "the powers that be," or TPTB, as fans often abbreviate. As Jennifer Hayward points out, the Internet provided "a more collaborative forum for soaps discussion" than was possible by individual fan letters or other previous modes of communication.³³ Further, the Internet's hybrid of concentrated niche spaces that are nevertheless public gave fans unprecedented ability to create

³³ Hayward, Jennifer, "Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Soap Opera," *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Text Reader* Second Edition, Ed. Gail Dines and Jean M. Humez, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003, 507-521, 515. Originally published in Hayward, Jennifer, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera*, Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1997. Hayward writes about the rape storyline of popular *One Life to Live* character Todd Manning in the 1990s as an instance to examine the complicated interaction between producers and consumers. Hayward is among the first to include excerpts from online fan interactions surrounding soap texts and writes that "soaps are ground breaking most of all in the community of viewers they produce" (520).

their own texts based on their reception of the show through public commentaries and discussions.

In my research on pro wrestling fan communities, I have previously outlined five ways in which fans interact with the texts of shows: fan discussion, fan criticism, fan theories, fan performance, and fan community building.³⁴ This framework applies to soap opera fandom as well. In these online forums, soap fans can simultaneously discuss, critique, theorize, write their own written parodies and alternative storylines, and form a community around these shows, along with the potential for explicit political organization to rally for directions in story, casting, or airtime that they see best.³⁵ Understanding that soap opera fan communities can serve these and many other functions simultaneously is key in grasping the power of these online forums in the viewing experience, as well as in the social lives of these fans. C. Lee Harrington and Denise D. Bielby point out that some work on soaps has attempted to frame all audience interaction with soaps according to one particular theoretical framework, while the diversity of interests and

³⁴ Ford, Sam, "Pinning Down Fan Involvement: An Examination of the Multiple Modes of Engagement for Professional Wrestling Fans," in revision, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 2007.

³⁵ John Fiske writes about the aspects of gossip and oral culture in soap opera fandom in Fiske, John, *Television Culture*, London: Methuen, 1987. He traces the history of scholarship on gossip in women's culture and its intersection with work on soap opera, concluding that soaps work cohesively within this gossip culture by providing daily interaction that can be discussed and debated by viewers. Mary Ellen Brown expands on the role of gossip and women's talk in framing the enjoyment of soap opera, as she finds her own enjoyment of soaps greatly limited until she becomes part of the fan culture and joins discussions about the soaps. Brown, Mary Ellen, *Soap Opera and Women's Talk: The Pleasure of Resistance*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994. The development of Brown's work corresponds with Henry Jenkins' seminal *Textual Poachers*, which forms some of the underpinnings of both later scholarship on soap opera fan communities and my own work in the Convergence Culture Consortium, of which Jenkins is the director. See Jenkins, Henry, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1992. Also, see Tulloch, John, "Talking About Television Soap Opera." *Watching Television Audiences: Cultural Theories and Methods*, London: Arnold, 2000, 56-82. Tulloch focuses on how this "women's talk" aspect of both the show and the fan community make stories about important health issues and contemporary social issues particularly intriguing.

interactions surrounding soap texts are much too varied to fit neatly into one overarching explanation.³⁶

According to Robert C. Allen, soap operas are best understood through a “reader-oriented poetics” establishing the ways in which the soap opera text empowers the viewer to construct their own meanings.³⁷ In particular, Allen calls the soap opera an “over-coded” narrative form in which “characters, events, situations, and relationships are invested with signifying possibilities greatly in excess of those necessary to their narrative functions.”³⁸ Here, the power granted to the soaps audience becomes evident in understanding and interpreting the spaces of the fictional town, the facial expressions of various characters, and the overwhelming amount of weekly dialogue. As Allen writes, “the spatial worlds of soap operas can be represented as an aggregate of atomistic interiors whose relationship to each other in space is constructed in the mind of the viewer.”³⁹

Nancy K. Baym suggests that Allen’s concept of *over-coding* is particularly appropriate in application to online communities, where “viewers watch soap operas in close and distant ways simultaneously” in order to use all these codes.⁴⁰ Her point relates to the five categories of interaction around the soap opera text I outlined earlier: fan discussion, fan criticism, fan

³⁶ Harrington, C. Lee and Denise D. Bielby, *Soap Fans: Pursuing Pleasure and Making Meaning in Everyday Life*, Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1995.

³⁷ Allen, Robert C., *Speaking of Soap Operas*, Chapel Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 1985, 61-95. Allen describes how an understanding of the artistry of the soap opera is only possible through the eyes of the audience. He further emphasizes that soaps must be viewed as a full text, instead of looking at individual episodes. Any examination of an individual episode is automatically going to be taken out of context, if the history leading up to and the events anticipated in that show are not examined in some degree.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴⁰ Baym, Nancy K., *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, London: Sage, 2000. See also Baym, Nancy K., “Talking About Soaps: Communicative Practices in a Computer-Mediated Fan Culture,” *Theorizing Fandom: Fans, Subculture and Identity*, Ed. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander, Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1998, 63.

theories, fan performance, and fan community building. Baym writes specifically about how fans perform through writing synopses of episodes or updates for message boards, becoming storytellers themselves and gaining a following for their performances through their analysis, interpretation, and cynicism.⁴¹ In this way, fans help bolster each others' support of the show so that, even if the show does not meet their expectations, fan discussion and even griping and parodying of the show can actually help keep people with the program through a creative draught.

I have found that one aspect of creative generation on the part of the fan community focuses on constructing a cohesive narrative space for the show. On *As the World Turns*, Oakdale is simultaneously considered a small town and the home of several major corporations. Paul Ryan's penthouse shows a skyline view of a few very tall buildings in the middle of Oakdale, even while other residents complain of being in such a small town that you run into your enemies wherever you go. How can the town be both? By never definitively showing us the setting, the creative team requires viewers to make sense of these various comments and settings into a comprehensive Oakdale. Matt Hills defines these spaces implied but never shown as *hyperdiegesis*, "the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text," but which still tries to have some sort of internal logic.⁴² Of course, as Steven D. Stark points out, the reason these exteriors are never shown has to do with budget and filming, since on-location filming is extremely rare for soaps.⁴³ Nevertheless, these narrative gaps empower much of the fan energy surrounding immersive story

⁴¹ Baym, Nancy K., *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, London: Sage, 2000, 85-86.

⁴² Hills, Matt, *Fan Cultures*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 137.

⁴³ Stark, Steven D., *Glued to the Set: The 60 Television Shows and Events That Made Us Who We Are Today*, New York: The Free Press, 1997, 206.

worlds, in that the shows raise as many questions as they provide answers, and the fan communities use much of their time to bring up issues of continuity and fleshing out the space in which these shows take place.⁴⁴

Baym points out, though, that these creative activities on the fans' part also address flaws in continuity on the writers' part and that fan communities particularly focus on the "violation of the truth of the fiction established through prior shows," and particularly on character inconsistency.⁴⁵ While aspects of fandom like fan fiction are not popular in most of these soap fan communities, community members often establish followings from other fans through their ability to both find breaks in continuity and also to create potential ways to make sense of those breaks in relation to the history of the show. Some of these community members who gain followings of their own I have written about previously as creating the phenomenon of "fans of fans."⁴⁶

This open-ended process of understanding and analyzing the text of the show fuels much of the fan communities' discussion, even as the other elements of fan communication take place. Baym finds that only 16 percent of the postings in the fan community she studied were "non-interpretive," and each of those threads often contained some interpretive responses, with 53 percent of the responses she studied focusing specifically on character motivation.⁴⁷ For instance,

⁴⁴ By *immersive story worlds*, I mean media properties which have serial storytelling structure, multiple creative forces which author various parts of the story, a sense of long-term continuity, a deep character backlog, contemporary ties to a complex narrative history, and a sense of permanence.

⁴⁵ Baym, Nancy K., *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, London: Sage, 2000, 99.

⁴⁶ Ford, Sam, "The Phenomenon of Fans of Fans," Convergence Culture Consortium Weblog, 05 November 2006, http://www.convergenceculture.org/weblog/2006/11/the_phenomenon_of_fans_of_fans.html.

⁴⁷ Baym, Nancy K., *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, London: Sage, 2000, 71-72.

in a soap opera love triangle, it is common to have almost as many fans support one side of a relationship as the other.⁴⁸ Since the text does not provide answers but only visuals, it is up to fans to debate the meaning that might be implied by images. Audience members will openly bring up their own histories to help explain characters' actions in many cases. If a character on a soap opera is raped or is the victim of domestic abuse, members of the fan community who have been victims or who have known victims of these atrocities may have the courage to share their own stories and then use that information to evaluate why characters may act in certain, initially puzzling ways.

Baym claims that, "in one sense, soap operas are a game in which the text offers clues to how the plots will unfold and viewers use those clues to unravel the shows' puzzles."⁴⁹ If one accepts the veracity of this statement (which I do), then it becomes easy to see why soap opera fans might be particularly receptive to transmedia storytelling or alternate reality games.

Although projects like *Oakdale Confidential*, the successful novel based on *ATWT* and used in the television narrative while also being sold in stores, have only scratched the surface of this potential, the ability of online fan communities to interpret and communally digest and discuss the story world of *Oakdale* indicates that the soap genre might be particularly able to expand its narrative, due to such a rich and *over-coded* narrative universe for these longtime shows. As opposed to the more aggressive spoiler behaviors of *Survivor* fan communities in *Convergence Culture*,⁵⁰ Baym points out a particular fan who indicates that the term *spoilers* are a misnomer

⁴⁸ Producers and writers can help facilitate these types of discussions by providing "shades of gray" scenarios which do not clearly privilege one character's perspective or leave a particular character in the clear moral right.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁵⁰ Jenkins, Henry, *Convergence Culture Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York: New York UP, 2006, 25-58.

because, in a genre where how and why matter much more than what happens, nothing is spoiled when an upcoming plot is revealed.⁵¹

However, it is important to realize that a significant portion of soap opera fans are probably not online. Soap operas air on broadcast television, and the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 98.2 percent of households had at least one television set in 2001.⁵² Meanwhile, in 2003, 61.8 percent of American households were estimated to have a computer in the home, while 54.7 percent had Internet access in the home. Having a computer and Internet in the home was least prevalent for Americans 65 and older, with 34.7 percent having a computer and 29.4 percent having Internet access.⁵³ A significant portion of the behaviors and storyline extensions studied here require an Internet connection, and some even require a broadband Internet connection for streaming video, for which a significant portion of online users do not have access at this point. While I have not seen specific statistics on Internet usage among soap opera viewers, this study is completed with that limitation in mind. Nevertheless, the Internet provides a significant platform for extending the social networks built around soaps, and a significant number of new soap viewers are joining discussion boards or reading soap opera sites each year, if the number of first-time posters in these online forums I have viewed are any indication.

⁵¹ Baym, Nancy K., *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, London: Sage, 2000, 88.

⁵² “Special Edition: 50th Anniversary of ‘Wonderful World of Color’ TV.” U.S. Government Census Bureau Web site, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2004/cb04-ffse04.pdf>, 11 March 2004, statistics from 2001, <http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2004/cb04-ffse04.pdf>.

⁵³ “Households With a Computer and Internet Access by Selected Characteristics: 2003,” Table A, *Computer and Internet Use in the United States: 2003*, U.S. Government Census Bureau Web site, Table A, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p23-208.pdf>, October 2005.

My Focus on the Online Fan Community

Baym's research provides a solid foundation to build on, but the online world has changed significantly from the discussion groups she studied in the 1990s to the new technologies and forums available in 2007. During the time Baym was studying, online discussion groups were still in relative infancy, whereas there are a much wider variety of soap opera discussion forums today in a variety of formats. A much greater portion of the viewership has signed on in the past decade, even as the overall number of soaps viewers has declined. Further, these contemporary discussion groups exist alongside a variety of soap opera Web sites, blogs, podcasts, videos, and other new media products, both professional and fan-created, that did not exist in the 1990s.

While the majority of Baym's focus is on how soap opera fan communities are built and maintained and how they function on a daily basis, I am particularly interested in the perceived and actual ways that these fan communities interact with each other and the producers of the show with the explicit hope of making an impact. Through my research on soap opera fan communities, I incorporate conversations I observed and occasionally participated in as a fan on Michael Gill's Media Domain board for *As the World Turns*⁵⁴ as well as Procter & Gamble Productions' officially maintained discussion site for the show, the PGP SoapBox and other online forums.⁵⁵ I did not initiate the conversations I write about, even if I responded in a similar vein with other fans along the way. Further, although I publicly informed members of the fan community about my scholarly interest in soap opera fan communities and even pointed the way to various conversations of the community I had quoted in various Weblog commentaries on the

⁵⁴ *As the World Turns* Discussion Board, Michael Gill's Media Domain, <http://www.mediadomain.com/cgi-bin/netforum/atwt/a.cgi/1>.

⁵⁵ PGP Soapbox, <http://www.pgpphoto.com:3864/index.php>.

Convergence Culture Consortium Web site for MIT, these types of conversations were occurring before I ever became an active part of this community, when I was just lurking.

It is important to consider the public discussions these fans have and the sophistication of these debates about the fan community's autonomy and political influence on the shows they watch. These fan communities often have complex conversations, looking at the show not only from their own perspective but also from the mindset of marketers, producers, networks, or actors. The fans also often take into account various economic and cultural factors that may explain why creative decisions were made for a show when criticizing or trying to ascertain the reasons behind a character leaving the show or a storyline changing course. The intent in consulting the expertise of specific discussions from the fan community throughout this study echoes the understanding of the idea of *vernacular theory* as expressed by Thomas McLaughlin.⁵⁶ McLaughlin writes about consulting a popular music fanzine for its theoretic questions about "artistic authenticity and the realities of economic life" when the author is reacting to a certain situation that he finds to be "legitimately theoretical practice (that) arises out of an intensely local commitment. It is situation, not distanced and systematic, but it asks a question about the socially constructed terms that define the local, and that is what critical theory does."⁵⁷

This fan interaction shares close ties with the history of interaction among fans and between fans and producers that have been documented in the past several pages. It is important to emphasize that online discussion groups have not replaced the lively debate fans have always had when watching a show or after the fact in telephone, workplace, or dinner conversations, nor has the rise of online forums brought about the demise of fan clubs, letters written to a show's

⁵⁶ McLaughlin, Thomas, *Street Smarts and Critical Theory*, Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1996.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

producers, or the soap opera press. Instead, fans often participate in a number of these activities, generating more of the type of *hypersocial* environment as described by Mizuko Ito than a disconnected media viewing experience that removes fans from social interaction.⁵⁸

Instead of replacing these older modes of conversation, online fan communities make more explicit and public the type of activities fans have long engaged in while in small groups. Fans also see these forums as providing extensions to the limits of previous modes of engagement: a more collective organization in disputing their dislike of particular storylines that may garner more attention than a letter-writing campaign; a more diverse conversation with other fans of the show, not limited to the more intimate social circles of previous generations; a more critical engagement with the show than the more passive nature of the fan clubs allow for; and a space to provide for themselves the critical responses to the show that they see the soap opera press as lacking. Along with the rise of online fan communities, not surprisingly, came a rise in online sites that also provide coverage of soap operas, such as Soapdom,⁵⁹ Soap Opera Network,⁶⁰ and Soap Central.⁶¹ However, these sites still tend to be lacking the critical engagement with backstage politics, shifts in creative teams, and organized understandings of what is set to happen in coming months on various shows, so fans still largely fill this gap

⁵⁸ Ito, Mizuko, "Technologies of the Childhood Imagination: Media Mixes, Hypersociality, and Recombinant Cultural Form," *SSRC Items and Issues* 4.4 (Winter 2003-2004), 31-34, http://www.ssrc.org/programs/publications_editors/publications/items/online4-4/ito-childhood.pdf. *Hypersociality* is the tendency of cross-platform content to increase social interaction among members of a fan community. The concept is intended to challenge and circumvent previous understandings of media consumption which focused on individual media consumers in isolation. Ito finds that games like *Yu-Gi-Oh* encourages stronger social ties by encouraging fans to share stories and exchange cards. These social bonds not only help in community-formation but also strengthen the bond each fan has with the franchise and the depth of their engagement with related media products.

⁵⁹ Soapdom, <http://www.soapdom.com>.

⁶⁰ Soap Opera Network, <http://www.soapoperanetwork.com>.

⁶¹ Soap Central, <http://www.soapcentral.com>.

themselves. In fact, fans on message boards scour various documents from the soap opera press and put the details together to provide a more cohesive, balanced, and comprehensive account of what is coming up and what is happening behind-the-scenes on their favorite shows.⁶²

These online sites provide a rich space for fans to organize and debate their existence as a politicized whole and to articulate their interests in where they want “their story” to go. What most producers still fail to realize is that fan criticism is not a sign of anger at the show but rather a deep investment. Even when fans aren’t satisfied, it is often their ability to have a space in which they can communally vent, complain, parody, and argue that renews interest in the show, even if the show is not at its most creative. As Baym writes, “the soap opera regularly falls short of what fans would like,”⁶³ but soap producers have much to gain by the fans’ ability to voice complaints because the very act of participating keeps their interest in the program going longer because the fans also entertain each other. Baym identifies humor as especially important here, as fan parody empowers fans and often brings enjoyment out of a text that they would otherwise have little to gain from.⁶⁴ Baym says that, “by using the show’s flaws as material with which to entertain each other, the community becomes amusing enough to hold the participants’ attention through the show’s lows.”⁶⁵ When soaps attempt to gain younger viewers with characters the longtime audience are uninterested in or even openly disdain, that hardcore audience can often use online venues to express their communal dislike for certain actors or characters.

⁶² I have not found any subscriber numbers for these discussion boards or extensive user data for the most popular soap opera sites, but the soap opera magazines at grocery store checkouts are likely to get much greater readership (especially if one counts the number of people who read them without ever buying a copy).

⁶³ Baym, Nancy K., *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*, London: Sage, 2000, 97.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

Fans often debate whether writers or actors from the show might be reading their comments, including one situation in which fans debate whether an actor's suicide could in some way have been driven by their own analysis of his declining physical appearance. In the case of PGP SoapBox, these conversations even include exchanges with representatives from the production company that makes the show. In another example, response to an interview from *As the World Turns* head writer Jean Passanante led to some passionate fans organizing a write-in campaign to call for her replacement.

Understanding how these communities are formed and maintained can not only help illuminate the importance of the social network surrounding these media texts but can also help media producers better understand how to shift their storytelling and communication with fans to more effectively utilize new ways of reaching these fan communities that are so ready to engage more deeply with these shows. This essay has presented a trajectory in which fans have increasingly sought out ways to gain greater access to a social network which allows them to collectively discuss, critique, perform their own creative writing on, theorize, and build community around these shows. The online fan discussion board provides a particularly strong venue for these deeply engaged activities. Here, the importance of social engagement around these texts becomes more apparent, and the collective intelligence of the fan base in trying to make sense of the immersive story worlds presented in these texts is highlighted.