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Whose stories are they? Fans' engagement with soap opera narratives in three sites of fan activity

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Whose Stories Are They?
Fans' Engagement with Soap Opera
Narratives in Three Sites of Fan Activity

Denise D. Bielby, C. Lee Harrington, and William T. Bielby

Soap opera narratives are subject to multiple and conflicting claims of "own-ership" about who is entitled to make evaluative judgments about quality. Our research examines how dedicated fans' claims are mediated within three sites: fan clubs, daytime magazines, and electronic bulletin boards. These sites differ in the frequency and visibility of fan interaction and in the degree to which fan discourse can be managed by producers, which in turn shapes social interaction among fans and the legitimacy with which they can assert claims to the narrative.

Television programs are both commodities and cultural products. Their production takes place within a context of conflict over creative and financial considerations among a variety of different organizations, groups, and individuals (Cantor & Cantor, 1992; DiMaggio, 1977; Montgomery, 1989). Research on the television industry finds that network programmers are confronted with managing the inherent conflicts and contradictions that arise from juggling commercial and aesthetic assessment criteria in their search for financial success (Bielby & Bielby, 1994). Despite network executives' best efforts, there are never guarantees that audiences' tastes will coincide with what programmers hope will be commercially successful products (Gitlin, 1983).

Commercial success is the bottom line for anything that airs on network television. Programmers care primarily that their product appeals to large numbers of viewers with demographic profiles that advertisers value, and care little about the meanings, significance, or ritual that television fulfills as a cultural product to a core audience of dedicated fans (Cantor & Cantor, 1986). In the business of television, viewers matter more than fans, but the product itself matters more to fans than to other viewers. The distinction between a television viewer and a television fan is an important one. To "view" television is to engage in a relatively private behavior. To be a "fan," however, is to participate in a range of activities that extend beyond the private act of viewing and reflects an enhanced emotional involvement with a television narrative. Such activities may include purchasing or subscribing to fan magazines, writing letters to actors, producers, writers, or to fan publications, conversing with other fans on electronic bulletin boards, joining fan clubs, attending fan events, and

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so on (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a; Jenkins, 1992).

While there is a well-established tradition of qualitative research on television viewers, especially since the early 1980s (for a review see Lindlof, 1991), scholarship on fans (as defined above) is more recent. Published in the early 1990s were a series of ethnographically-based analyses of fans of primetime television, particularly "Star Trek," by scholars working within the humanities (e.g. Bacon-Smith, 1992; Jenkins, 1992; Penley, 1991). More recent work has shifted focus from primetime to daytime television (e.g. Harrington & Bielby, 1995a), from fans of domestic to foreign products (e.g. Middleham & Wober, 1997), and from humanistic to social scientific and communications perspectives (e.g. Collins, 1997; Cooper, 1997; Harrington & Bielby, 1995a). Fan research builds upon and extends traditional audience research in several related ways: by expanding the range of activities through which viewers are said to "consume" a television series; by situating this consumption more explicitly within the television production industry; by moving from an isolated-viewer model to an examination of the fan-industry relationship; and by considering other media that shape the relationship between consumers and producers of television, such as the organized fan industry, fan magazines, and electronic communication. Research on fans thus speaks not only to academic scholars, but also potentially to a wide range of industry participants: professional media critics; television actors, producers, and writers; print media editors and writers; those working in the fan industry; and fans themselves.

Our research takes a sociological approach to the study of U.S. soap opera fans. We address the following question: how is fans' public discourse with one another and with industry participants shaped and mediated by the arena or "site" in which it occurs? We draw on qualitative data from three different sites of fan activity — fan clubs, daytime magazines, and electronic bulletin boards — to assess the circumstances under which fans' "claims" to a narrative are (or are not) granted legitimacy within the industry. Specifically, we analyze how distinctive features of soap opera narratives and their production and consumption lead to multiple and often conflicting claims of "ownership," defined here as assertions about who is entitled to make evaluative judgments about the quality of the product. We show how the emergence and evolution of visible and autonomous sites have transformed the conflict within the daytime industry regarding the legitimacy with which fans can assert claims to the narrative.

The Daytime Serial Genre: The Interdependence Among Producers, Viewers, and Fans

Distinctive features of the soap opera genre's narrative structure create a unique relationship between producers, viewers, and fans. An open-ended narrative with storylines that never achieve closure builds viewer loyalty that can last for decades (Cassata, 1985; Harrington & Bielby, 1995a; Intintoli, 1984; Whetmore & Kielwasser, 1983). To sustain continuity, soap producers must make the narrative appear authorially seamless, despite the fact that soaps are collaboratively authored by many different participants — producers, writers, directors, actors, and others — who come and go in the world of soap production (Allen, 1985). The headwriter is usually considered the "true" author of the soap narrative (Cantor & Pingree, 1983; Rouverol, 1984), but as in all television and film production, soap writers do not hold copyright to their stories and have no legal claim to ownership (Gaines, 1991; Harris, 1994). Furthermore, writers' creative rights are contractually constrained; their contributions are formally acknowledged only by the on-screen credits specified in collective bargaining agreements. Both legal and organizational arrangements thus deny legitimacy to the "true" authors of soap opera, which contributes to a sense that ownership of the narratives can be contested. Ironically, it is soaps' very success at creating and sustaining a seamless fictional world that creates a space for viewers to assert their claims when they perceive continuity is broken.

From the soap producers' perspective, they are creating a commodity, a commercial product. But soap audiences do not see themselves simply as consumers. For them, the dichotomy between production and consumption, the supply-side and the demand-side, breaks down. The soap audience values an emotional authenticity which is embedded in the narrative but is not easily accessible; to derive value from the product delivered by the producers requires an investment by the viewer (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a; Whetmore & Kielwasser, 1983). This process begins with an investment of time, but for some viewers it expands into a commitment to acquire additional information about the characters and the fictional world they inhabit. It is the dedicated fan who derives maximum value from the product, typically by developing an interest in the circumstances of the soap's production, the relationship between the fictional characters and the actors' off-screen lives, and secondary sites such as the soap press where ancillary narratives about the soaps are produced (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a). Cultivating these interests often involves actively engaging these secondary sites, such as tracking industry news and contributing to fan opinion in the soap press, participating in conversations on electronic bulletin boards, and attending fan club gatherings and other public events related to the soaps. These activities generate widely circulated analysis, gossip, and interpretation that heighten a soap's value to fans and form the basis for their communities of shared meaning (Fine, 1979). In turn, these communities establish collective significance, even though viewing itself usually takes place in the privacy of a fan's own home.

While fans are not, of course, participating directly in the actual creation of soap storylines, they can contribute to a larger ancillary discourse that reveals their sense of ownership over the narratives. Fans know when the production community is failing to deliver a story with the emotional authenticity they seek. When that happens, they feel entitled to complain and to assert claims as to how resources could be better deployed to enhance the quality of the show (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a; Hobson, 1982). Fans are simultaneously loyal and critical, and their claims reveal the tension between the aesthetic basis of fans' sense of ownership as compared to the commercial concerns of soap producers and network executives: what is "right" or "good" versus what sells (Hobson, 1982; Seiter, Borchers, Kreutzner, & Warth, 1989; Williams, 1992). According to fans, their responsibility is to prevent a narrative's aesthetic value from being squandered by those whose interest is largely economic (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a).

While all fans pass judgment on the quality of the texts they consume, they differ across genres in the legitimacy with which their critical claims are received by those who directly participate in the creation and commercial distribution of cultural products. In some genres, fans engage in "textual poaching" to assert claims to ownership, as Jenkins (1992) discovered among the fans of *Star Trek* and the short-lived prime time program *Beauty and the Beast.* By textual poaching Jenkins refers to fans' appropriation of fictional characters, settings, and storylines for use in their own creative activities. While fan-produced materials are unsanctioned by the industry, as long as they are handled on a nonprofit basis the producers usually treat them with "benign neglect (Jenkins, 1988, p. 89)."

Soap fans rarely engage in the poaching activities common to other genres (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a, p. 19-22). Instead, they are increasingly able to express their criticism in a range of public forums. The primary sites for soap fans' public claims — fan clubs, daytime magazines, and the expanding site of electronic bulletin boards — differ in the autonomy afforded to fan criticism and the degree to which commercial interests are able to manage, constrain, or even respond to fan commentary. If fans think of themselves as "owners" of the narrative, then the degree of autonomy they have to express their views without interference from those with a commercial stake in the industry is important to legitimating their entitlement to the narrative, and their perceived right to pass judgment on it. Moreover, the extent to which these sites allow

for frequent and public interaction among fan-as-critics further reinforces and legitimates their sense of ownership of the narrative.

Fan clubs are a traditional vehicle for audience members to connect with a series, interact with actors, and (to a far lesser extent) with a show's writers and producers. They publish newsletters that allow fans to express their opinions and to solicit contact with one another to exchange views. Fan clubs hold annual gatherings, which provide the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with other fans and for the establishment and maintenance of social bonds. But fan clubs exist first and foremost to promote the show and are only secondarily a site for fans' critical expression. Moreover, newsletters and gatherings allow for only intermittent public expression of criticism and collective interaction among fans.

Daytime magazines first appeared in the late 1960s (LaGuardia, 1974), and they have proliferated over the past decade. They provide an increasingly important forum for fan opinion and criticism in the form of letters expressing views about issues of emotional authenticity, continuity, and history. Soap magazines have been expanding the space devoted to fan feedback, and they are increasingly offering legitimated "professional" criticism through resident critics and recurring features (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a). However, the magazines depend on access to the industry for their existence, and they must remain in good favor with individual writers and producers in order to survive. While they have been the most widely engaged outlet for fan concerns, they are constrained in the extent to which they can venture into true criticism.

Electronic bulletin board systems (BBSs) are the newest forum for fan criticism. Some, such as those sponsored by America Online (AOL), Prodigy, and CompuServe, are commercial operations, and others, such as Internet based Usenet newsgroups and World Wide Web "guestbooks," are not. Commercial or not, the provider is simply supplying a (cyber)space for fans to express views. The BBS providers do not have to maintain access to industry for their existence, profitability, or popularity. This forum provides the greatest fan autonomy and the least potential for management and control by production teams.

In different ways, each of these sites — fan clubs, magazines, and electronic bulletin boards — mediates the relationship between fans, writers, and producers, and each serves as a distinct forum for contests over ownership of the narrative. These three sites differ in visibility and autonomy afforded to fan criticism and the degree to which the interests of a serial's production team constrain what fans can claim publicly. They also vary in the degree to which producers can control insider information, fans' access to actors and the production staff, and fan interaction itself. The historical evolution of sites — from fan clubs and soap fan magazines which began to proliferate in the early 1970s, to electronic bulletin boards which achieved widespread popularity in the mid-1990s — has been towards greater visibility and autonomy. We examine how the emergence and evolution of publicly accessible sites that allow for frequent and visible interaction among fans-as-critics reinforces and further legitimates fans' sense of entitlement to the narrative by allowing them to find others who share similar views. What was once a private viewing experience shared locally is now a collective one shared nationally, and even internationally.

Fan clubs, magazines, and bulletin boards were first identified as important sites for fan activity by Harrington & Bielby (1995a). However, their research was not specifically designed as a comparative analysis of those sites. Moreover, in the early 1990s, when their data were collected, participation on electronic bulletin boards was limited to affluent and technologically sophisticated computer users, few of whom employed the technology to pursue interests in electronic media (James, Wotring, & Forest, 1995). Since 1994, participation on electronic bulletin boards has expanded widely, and soap discussion groups have become an established outlet for fan interaction. By collecting new data from 1995 through 1997 for all three sites, we are able to take an explicitly comparative approach to assess how differences among them

influence the legitimacy and efficacy of fans' claims to ownership of the narrative. In sum, our analysis allows us to compare how these three sites facilitate or constrain the degree to which fans engage their own personal, aesthetic, and emotional criteria to make quality judgments about soaps which compete directly with the decisions of those who create and produce daytime narratives.

Method

Our analysis of three sites for fan interaction is based primarily on data collected between January, 1995 and December, 1997. Over that period, we observed twelve fan club events and interviewed informants who attended ten others. In addition, we analyzed fan opinion published in fifteen daytime serial and actor fan club newsletters and in each of the eight soap fan magazines.[1] In addition, we relied on an archive of the population of Internet newsgroup postings for April, 1995 through December, 1997.[2] We also monitored electronic bulletin board postings on the America Online, CompuServe, and Prodigy soap opera message boards, and we collected data on fan opinion posted on 55 commercial and fan-supported web pages.

While we rely primarily on data collected since January, 1995, we also reanalyzed some of the data initially collected for Harrington & Bielby's (1995a) study of the social organization of soap fan subculture. We draw upon their 29 interviews with a representative sampling of actors, writers, executive producers, casting directors, network executives, daytime journalists, and fan club staff members from all levels of the daytime industry. All who were contacted consented to an interview, except one soap magazine journalist who did not return our phone calls. Interviewees were located through referral by industry members who provided us entree into the business. Interview questions for those individuals were designed to uncover industry participants' interpretation of work in the industry, the soap genre and its production, their opinion of the role of fans in the world of daytime television, and their own sense of ownership over soap narratives. Most interviews took place by telephone; three were conducted face-to-face. All interviews were semi-structured and open-ended.[3]

Since the completion of Harrington and Bielby's (1995a) study, we have continued extensive fieldwork on the industry and its audience, using conventional participant-observation techniques. We have attended shopping mall and charity events where daytime celebrities appeared, visited soap opera studios to view the taping of episodes and observed the production process firsthand. We have also attended taped industry award shows. These activities have contributed to our understanding of the soap production process, celebrity culture, and the world of the daytime fan.

To illustrate the basis for conclusions drawn from the qualitative data, we report below exemplars from letters published in fan club newsletters and soap publications, interviews with industry participants as quoted in the daytime press, and BBS dialogues.[4] We use these data to address conflicts over soap narrative ownership and focus on the tension between producers' commercial concerns and fans' aesthetic ones. Quoted material is representative of the types of dialogues routinely occurring between members of the daytime community. Content analyses were conducted to extract themes suggesting the varied and often conflicting interpretations of soap opera fans with respect to the question of narrative ownership, and how those interpretations are contextualized by the site in which the claims are made.

Analysis

Fan Clubs as a Site of Fan Interaction

Most fan clubs form voluntarily though collective and publicly expressed interest on the part of fans, who then staff and manage the club under the sponsorship of a show or an actor (if the club is organized for a particular actor

on a show). The structure of individual fan clubs tends to be informal, and clubs are loosely organized, amorphous, and staffed by volunteers (Harrington & Bielby, 1995a, p. 35). Fan club membership carries a variety of benefits, an important one being a newsletter from the show (or actor) sponsored, filled with personal responses to fans' letters or letters written just to the fan club membership (Trinajstick, 1989). However, the primary benefit is that the fan is embedded in a network of people with similar interests. Through exchanging videotapes, attending annual events, and becoming pen pals, club members may develop lifelong friendships with people they might not otherwise have met.

Publications produced by fan clubs are "narrowcast," not broadcast, texts (Fiske, 1992, p. 39); that is, they are produced exclusively by and for use by viewers of a particular show who are members of the fan club, and they are virtually unknown outside the soap community. Contentiousness, controversies, and differences of opinion among fans seldom become known outside or even inside the membership, if at all. A fan who becomes dissatisfied with the show is more likely to drop his or her membership than launch an organized protest, although the latter is not inconceivable, nor are splinter groups with special interests that organize to support a particular actor or actors (see Harrington & Bielby, 1995a, pp. 33-36). For the most part, fan club newsletters publish fan correspondence which has been submitted to share the experience of contact with the show's actors through personal appearances, or other venues, or to declare the effect of being caught up by a storyline, character, or actor. The consequence is that a fan's private viewing experience is made available for others to share, and a collective experience is built from a singular one, as the following example illustrates:

> I think the one storyline to date on OLTL [One Life To Live] that has brought in so many mixed views, opinions, and emotions is that of the Angel Square [street gang] story...My views on it were pretty positive. I mean these types of groups do exist. Yes, it has been kind of a brutal story of sorts, but very brave again for OLTL to delve into something that had not been seeing [sic] anyplace else in daytime. It had also introduced us to some brilliant actors...For me these men quickly became an important part of the Llanview canvas. I found that with this gang storyline, [head writer] Michael Malone once again did a good job of making you believe these guys meant business, whether they be part of The Prides or The Arrows, and really made me take interest in what they had to say...So all in all for me it hasn't been that bad, and once again BRAVO! BRAVO! to Horgan, Malone, and all else involved who have taken brave steps, measures, and chances with a storyline that has gotten you so many mixed opinions, and for sticking it out to the end regardless of what the general view. Thanks again OLTL for keeping the show the most original drama in all of daytime. (One Life to Live Fan Club Newsletter, 1995-96, p. 27)

This letter is typical of fan club newsletter correspondence in that it praises a storyline within the overall narrative. While a fan club's newsletter will publish criticism, it is always carefully framed in terms of support for the show, as the above example illustrates. As a venue for fan criticism, clubs are extremely limited because of their need to maintain a good relationship with the serial and the actors, and because of the limited channels of communication among fans, and between fans, writers, and producers.

Soap Magazines as a Site of Fan Criticism

Most magazines now include regular and ever-expanding forums as outlets for fan perspectives, such as "Letters to the Editor" in *Soap Opera Now!*, "Sound Off" in *Soap Opera Digest,* and "Mail Call," "Public Opinion, "A Reader's View" and "Fantastic Encounter" in *Soap Opera Weekly.* The wide circulation

of these magazines indicates that they are an important forum for fan-fan inter-
action, as well as for fans' claims to ownership.[5] The commentary they publish
reveals how fans engage the narrative in analytical ways and use their knowl-
edge to challenge the writers' performance. The audience's sense of ownership
is typically most apparent when they chose to *disown* a story. The following
quote is typical of published fan response:

> James E. Reilly [headwriter of *Days of Our Lives*] and his writing staff
> have done nothing for the past few years but cannibalize the wonder-
> ful community of characters established on *Days* in the early '80s.
> Maybe they are maintaining decent ratings now, but they are using up
> all the reserves of the show's story potential without banking anything
> for the future...Reilly and company justify their dull writing by wail-
> ing about how hard it is to generate story after lovers decide to
> marry...any writer who doesn't know that great story can definitely be
> generated after the marriage of great lovers ought to resign. (fan let-
> ter, *Soap Opera Weekly*, February 11, 1997, p. 44)

A central feature of the soap viewing experience is viewers' shared reac-
tions to a given episode or plot development. Previously such exchanges oc-
curred mostly within local communities of friends, relatives, and coworkers,
and they were considered unimportant gossip by most scholars, those in the
daytime industry, and non-fans (see Brown, 1994; Gamson, 1994). However,
publication of fan criticism conjoins points of agreement and debate, broadens
consensus of opinion among fans, legitimates their views as valid, and rein-
forces fans' sense of ownership over a soap's history, characters, and storylines.

On rare occasions, fans themselves write letters defending the decisions
of writers and producers against other fans' claims to narrative ownership.
One heated controversy in the soap opera world involved the firing of actor Jeff
Trachta from *The Bold and the Beautiful*, which generated vehement fan com-
plaints in the daytime press and on the Internet. A fan finally commented:

> The situation at present, with fans who are so consumed with the
> hirings and firings of soap stars, makes me concerned about the power
> that these special interest groups think they have over the medium. It
> is totally out of control...I, for one, am glad that producers make the
> kinds of decisions they do. They are responsible for pulling the drama
> together week after week. They need the right players to move the
> story along. I stand by [executive producer/headwriter] Bradley Bell's
> decision to do what he thinks is right. (fan letter, *Soap Opera Weekly*,
> February 4, 1997, p. 34)

While the visibility of audience criticism in daytime magazines offers public
legitimation of fans' insights and opinions, it also opens up increasing possi-
bilities for squabbles among fans, writers, and producers over ownership of
daytime narratives. Indeed, viewers' published claims have spawned a very
vocal turf battle over ownership which includes those involved in the commer-
cial end of the industry. For the most part, magazine editors and critics support
the trend towards giving fans a more public voice, as reflected in the views of
Mimi Torchin, Editor-in-Chief of *Soap Opera Weekly*:

> There are a few people in the industry who have criticized our prac-
> tice of allowing readers/viewers to critique a show in print. The con-
> sensus in some quarters is that criticism should be left to professional
> critics...I strongly disagree with that opinion. Many readers have an
> enormous amount of time and emotion invested in the soaps...whose
> opinions matter most? Those of a handful of professional journalists,
> or those of the millions of viewers who love the soaps?...Many of the
> viewing public, when given a chance to make their views known,

have just as much right to be heard. (Torchin, 1992, p. 4)

The tension between the daytime industry and fans' interests can stretch the boundaries of interchange between the daytime magazines and those they write about, but the relative isolation and small size of the industry prevents journalists from becoming too critical. The daytime press' concerns about its relationships with producers, writers, and actors is articulated in a recent editorial by Lynn Leahy, Editor-in-Chief of *Soap Opera Digest:*

> We'd love it if everyone at every show loved everything we printed in every issue. Of course, that's hopelessly unrealistic, and we know it...What we never can seem to predict is just what someone's going to complain about. We'll brace ourselves when we print a hard-hitting article, and not hear a peep about it — then get a call from someone who didn't care for the picture that accompanied a glowing interview...We try very hard to produce a magazine that our readers love, and that the industry respects. But when it comes to pleasing everyone...we just cross our fingers and hope for the best! (Leahy, 1997, p. 23)

However, not all members of the daytime press see the value in promoting critical fan opinion and viewer feedback to the industry. Some experienced journalists believe that the trend toward "fan friendly" features such as letters to the editor, opinion columns, editorials, and critics' reviews, while generating reader interest, has gone too far. "Who the hell cares what fans are saying?" asks one veteran magazine journalist. "These features generate mail from readers and emotion among readers and encourage fan interaction in fan clubs and between pen pals, but that mail is not indicative of the readers comprising a magazine's circulation, only of those people who write" (quoted in Harrington & Bielby, 1995a, p. 72).

In short, in terms of the marketplace, soap fans see themselves as co-owners, as "affect investors," and they use the increased space in the magazines devoted to fan response to make their claims. Producers can use the same forum to reassure fans that their concerns are heard, but whether those concerns really do affect producers' actions depends on the larger commercial context (Cantor & Cantor, 1986). Thus, compared to fan clubs, the magazines are a more visible outlet for fan criticism. However, fans' response is still constrained, since they do not interact directly with one another and the selection of letters and the topic of feature articles is subject to editorial control.

Electronic Bulletin Boards: An Autonomous Cyberspace for Fans' Claims to Soap Narratives
Electronic bulletin boards are a rapidly growing means of fan communication. A BBS or message board allows a user to post messages on a given topic or to respond to the postings of others. Usenet newsgroups, the most widely accessible type of BBS, can be reached at no additional cost to anyone with an Internet connection. The three newsgroups devoted to soaps (rec.arts.tv. soaps.abc, rec.arts.tv.soaps.nbc, and rec.arts.tv.soaps.misc) receive hundreds of postings daily. In Figure 1 we report the number of monthly postings to these three newsgroups for the period from April, 1995 (the earliest date for which these data are available) through December, 1997. As can be seen in Figure 1, the number of newsgroup postings peaked in the summer of 1996. Since then, postings have declined as alternative electronic sites for voicing fan opinion have expanded. By December, 1997 the total number of postings had declined to a level below that of April, 1995.

Increasingly popular are the message boards devoted to soaps that are accessible through large commercial online service providers, especially AOL, which is projected to have 12 million subscribers once the acquisition with CompuServe is completed (Weber and Sandberg 1997; Information & Interac-

Figure 1
Soap Usenet Posts, April 1995 through December 1997
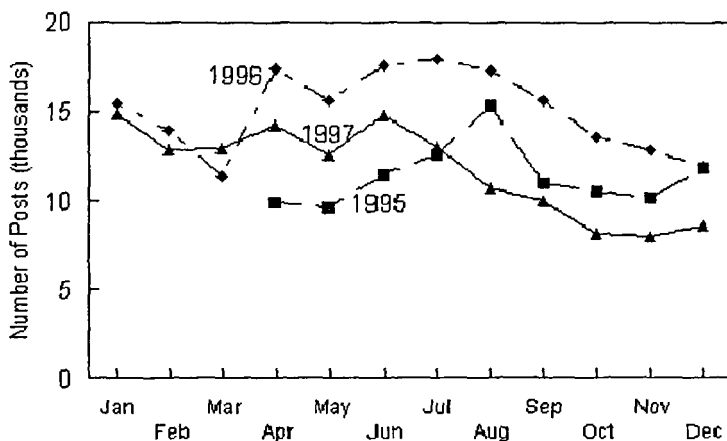
Source: web3.dejanews.com

tive *Services Report*, 1997; Seidman 1997, p. 51). As of October 1997, an AOL subscriber could access over 80,000 postings on the message boards, with as many as 50 topic folders for each serial. In addition, AOL subscribers have access to sites sponsored by the shows, fan clubs, and magazines, where they can find plot summaries and projections, "chat rooms" for real-time interaction with soap insiders, and libraries of transcripts and photos (Kape 1996, p. 5). Most soaps and the major fan magazines have developed a presence on AOL or on their own websites, where insiders, including actors, producers, writers, and critics, regularly appear on-line, both openly in regularly scheduled chats and informally as users themselves (Kape, 1996; Toney 1996). Similar services are provided by electronic television sites such as *Ultimate TV, The Gist*, and *TV Guide*.

This evolution of electronic sites for fan interaction has had a major impact on how fans make claims to ownership of the narrative, their sense of entitlement to make such claims, and how those claims are perceived and managed by the industry. We first report on how message boards have altered fan communities and fan claims, and then discuss how the soap industry has responded to this new form of fan criticism.

BBS dialogue on message boards is sequential and can be immediate, but it differs from typical conversational interaction in that it is not conducted face-to-face or over the telephone. The world of BBSs is an "intermediate realm" existing somewhere between isolated viewership and contact with the formal world of fan clubs, mall events, and celebrity luncheons (Harrington & Bielby 1995a, p. 167). BBSs provide a space where diverse groups of viewers can share ideas, hunches, insights, history, insider information, and backstage rumors.

BBSs are a unique forum for making ownership claims, and they differ in important ways from more conventional outlets for fan criticism. The activity that occurs on BBSs is in many ways similar to what occurs in the context of group viewing of soap operas, since both contexts have the potential for including large numbers of people with diverse points of view (see Lemish, 1985). Most BBS users not only have the freedom to make uninterruptable claims (given the nature of the medium), but most come together to share insights *after* having viewed the daily episode. As a result, they have time to reflect on what they have seen, and their commentary is often more detailed, complex,

analytical, and nuanced than that occurring in immediate face-to-face interaction (Bielby & Harrington, 1994). For example, the following was excerpted from a newsgroup post critical of the direction the producers of *As The World Turns* were taking the serial:

> I started thinking a little earlier about the fans discontent (to put it mildly) with ATWT these days and the solutions/ideas given by us posters to end our discontent with TPTB ["the powers that be"], the actors and actresses and the lack of historical influence on the show these days, and I was wondering if anyone else out there feels that maybe TPTB just don't know enough about the show's history to be/feel competent to write a story involving characters in Oakdale with a rich history (or to care enough about it to want to...)...[I]f that's the case, I personally blame P&G for hiring these numskulls in the first place, and am really puzzled why they don't let these loser PTB go and replace them with PTB that are familiar with the history of the show. (rec.arts.tv.soaps.cbs, June 17, 1997)

This posting elicited responses from nine other fans over a four day period, many of them as detailed and analytical as the one quoted above. The concern with continuity in the narrative is echoed in most of the responses, including the following:

> If *Guiding Light's* ratings continue to improve, however, while *As The World Turns'* continue to decline, [the executive producers] may come to the conclusion that they need to do what many of us on the Internet have been telling them all along, and concentrate on getting back to the basics of good stories, good acting, and character continuity...The real problem, in my opinion, is that the current writers have not seemed to figure out how to write successfully in the show's style and still haven't gotten a handle on the characters...It's not as though we haven't been telling [them] that all along here on the Internet... (rec.arts.tv.soaps.cbs, June 18, 1997)

As happens frequently in BBS dialogue, the participants in this discussion are clearly aware that others fans are expressing similar views, and are frustrated that the serial's producers are not getting the message. As another fan put it in this thread, "I read many of the [newsgroups] and it seems the opinion of wanting the focus on the core families and the history is what most of the people posting say they want."

In many ways, ownership claims made on BBSs differ significantly from public claims made visible by the daytime press. For one thing, BBS messages (especially those posted to Usenet newsgroups and to other non-commercial sites) are usually not subjected to the selection, censoring, or editing that published fan letters are, so they allow for a freer exchange of information. Equally important, fan letters are only belatedly interactive; because of the time lag in the publication of fan magazines, while fans might be able to "respond" to each other across issues, the forum does not adequately allow for truly interactive communication. With BBSs, however, discussion is interactive; it can be immediate, and it allows for the evolution over time of discussions among fans. As such, this intermediate realm allows fans to form social bonds through which they validate their claims outside the private and intimate world of family and friends. At the same time it puts them in touch with a large, like-minded community. One fan, quoted in *Soap Opera Digest*, described the sense of community on electronic bulletin boards in the following way:

> The impression that fans are angrier than they were in the past has more to do with technology than the truth. We're not more belligerent, we're just able to express ourselves more effectively now. There's

that instantaneous connection with others who might feel the same way you do. You're not left wondering whether you're the only one unhappy with a story or an actor...

In the same article, *Guiding Light* head writer James Harmon Brown observed:

> The Internet makes it more of a community where the fans feed off one another. If you're writing a letter in a room by yourself, it's just your opinion. When you're online and participating in the whole [chat] thing, it's like you're in a hall with a bunch of other people. (Gallagher, 1997, p. 51).

In short, participation on BBSs mimics the immediacy of private criticism while providing the relative anonymity and diversity of public criticism (Bielby & Harrington, 1994; Harrington & Bielby, 1995a, 1995b).

Industry-sponsored sites continue to proliferate, but there is little an online service, network, production company, or fan magazine can provide in the way of an electronic forum for exchanging criticism and views that fans cannot do on their own. Any fan on his or her own or with like-minded peers can start and support a web page or a Usenet newsgroup. Fan-supported sites provide numerous alternatives to the bulletin boards, chat rooms, viewer polls, and archive libraries of textual information and photos of the commercial online sites. For example, the "Soap Links" web site (members.aol.com/soaplinks.index.html) links to over 300 soap websites, and the vast majority of them are non-commercial, generated and maintained by fans. Fan-supported sites provide easily accessible autonomous forums, and many, with names such as "What's Wrong with OLTL," "The Disgruntled Fans & Actors Page," and "In My Humble Opinion," are devoted explicitly to fan criticism. Moreover, each of the fan-supported pages typically has links to many others, making it easy for committed fans to seek out those sites that they perceive are authentic and provide a forum for criticism and unlimited exchange of views. Thus, fans have numerous alternatives for engaging in critical dialogue with others who share their interests, free from editorial control by parties with a commercial interest in what is said about the serials. At the same time, fans also selectively engage the sites officially sponsored by the networks or production companies to meet their own needs, just as they do with fan magazines, fan club newsletters, or any other secondary text.

The tremendous expansion of electronic sites for fan dialogue and criticism has presented both an opportunity and a challenge to the fan magazines. On the one hand, by offering their own message boards, chat rooms, on-line libraries, or electronic subscriptions, the magazines are generating new revenue streams. On the other hand, the expansion of alternative outlets for fan criticism substantially erodes the role that magazine editors and professional critics play in deciding which fan voices are heard and what constitutes legitimate criticism. Identifying "the advent of the Internet as a site of fan activity" as one of daytime's "100 most memorable moments," the editors of *Soap Opera Weekly* were explicit about their ambivalence:

> By giving legions of fans the chance to meet fellow fans from far away places, through real-time chats, World Wide Web pages and message boards, the 'Net has created and helps foster an intimate community for soap fans, actors, and journalists. The down side is that the Internet's anonymity makes it possible for unfounded rumors, nasty criticism and plot scoops to be disseminated along with the valuable information that is meant to enhance the fans' viewing. (*Soap Opera Weekly,* September 30, 1997, p. 54).

The ease with which fans can mobilize over the Internet appears to be especially problematic to the soap press, since they jeopardize their working relationship with producers and access to the serials if they become too closely identified with such fan activities. Under the title "Analysis: Caught in the Web," Soap Opera Now! editorialized:

> Indeed, some of the most ardent and passionate appeals — and some of the craziest statements we've ever encountered — have come from these soap opera fans who are Internet savvy. A comment made in last week's issue of *Soap Opera Now!* was broadcast all over the web, posted on several message boards, and e-mailed to thousands of people within two hours (maybe less) of it appearing in our e-mail version. (We know this from the swift and extremely vicious e-mail we received initially; supportive statement statements came a few hours later.) A few years ago, such a massive movement could never have happened. Now, it's almost commonplace. And we know that executives at all three networks and all 11 soap operas get a similar treatment. One jerk starts a rumor (mostly wishful thinking; rarely a fact), and within minutes a show gets bombarded with angry and irrational e-mail. Than a wave goes out to network executives. Finally, it goes to the chairmen of Disney, Westinghouse and General Electric. Elapsed time? Four hours — tops. (*Soap Opera Now!*, August 4, 1997, p. 8).

While soap fans speculate at great length about the degree to which their criticisms are noticed by the industry, the editor of Soap Opera Now! is convinced that fan activity on the Internet has producers "running scared." In an editorial titled "Crisis of Confidence," editor Michael Kape wrote:

> ...There is suddenly a huge reluctance throughout the soap world to make major changes, even when they are desperately needed. The hue and cry from fans has been overwhelming in recent months, and with the ratings lower for our shows than they've ever been, there is now a huge reluctance for our shows to take any action which might, in some way, shape or form, upset viewers.
>
> ...the balance of power is shifting thanks to a revolution in the world of communications. In the old days, a soap opera could make a change which might be unpopular with some viewers. At that time, viewers were, for the most part, isolated from each other, and the means of communication among them were snail-like at best. Now, in this age of broadcast e-mail, chat rooms, news groups, instant messages, when a show makes a change, it's heard about almost immediately...A campaign to counter a move by a show can be mounted now in a matter of hours, with thousands of people joining in...This takes very little time, very little effort, and virtually no money to take place. (Kape, 1997, p. 7).

The above characterization in all likelihood overstates the impact of fans' mobilization on soap producers, but it is also clear that the growth of collective fan claims through electronic communication has the industry in a state of flux. The growth of electronic sites for fan communication has done more than facilitate exchange of views among like-minded fans. The soap industry's recent and growing immersion in BBSs has transformed them from an arena of fan-fan interaction, from one where claims to narrative ownership were circulated almost exclusively among fans and unknown "lurkers," to an arena whose interactants routinely include not only fans but soap journalists, actors, writers, and producers. Increasingly, fans' claims to ownership of the narrative are heard (if not heeded) by those who have actual control over soap story lines.

Discussion

Table 1
Characteristics of Sites for Fan Interaction

Site	Degree of Visibility/ Autonomy	Type of Interaction	Producer Frequency of Interaction	Visibility of Claims	Control Strategies
Fan Club	Low	Face-to-Face/ Sequential	Low	Low	"Benign Neglect"/ Cooperation
Fan Magazine	Medium	Sequential	Low/Medium	High	Access
Electronic Bulletin Board	High	Direct	High	High	Sponsorship

We have described the ways soap fans evaluate and make claims to "ownership" of the serial's narrative. We have analyzed how fan clubs, fan magazines, and electronic bulletin boards differ as forums for fan criticism, and the degree to which each affects the visibility and legitimacy of fans' claims and fosters a collective voice for what otherwise would be an individual response to a media product that is consumed privately. Table 1 summarizes the distinctive characteristics of each of the three sites as they pertain to fans' claims to the narrative. Fan magazines have made fans' ownership of the narrative more visible and legitimate, although they remain dependent upon good relations with producers, production companies, and the networks for access, and they are limited in the extent to which they provide a site for authentic interaction among fans. The emergence and expansion of BBSs in the mid-1990s have played an especially important role in transforming the nature of fan criticism. Electronic bulletin boards in particular allow fans with shared concerns about the narrative to interact directly and frequently and to visibly voice their criticisms, relatively free from producer interference. As a result, BBSs have facilitated collective fan identity and have significantly enhanced the legitimacy of fans' claims both among fans themselves and — to some extent — within the production community. Regardless of the site, through interaction with one another, fans develop an understanding that voicing   criticism is "the right thing to do" in the sense that they perceive they have the expertise to judge what is in the best interests of the serial and those who produce it, the audience, and the genre in general. Moreover, discovering that others publicly share the same perspective only reinforces the belief that their claims are valid and legitimate. These developments have presented new challenges to producers. Since the 1970s, producers have been able to rely on their relationships to fan clubs and to a lesser extent fan magazines to manage and control fan reactions to the soap narratives. But the expansion of electronic sites for fan interaction in the mid-1990s has provided a space for legitimate fan criticism that has remained autonomous from producers' control. We return to the issue of how producers may respond to the shifting terms of conflict below.

Conclusion

The distinctive features of the soap opera genre and the institutional context of the production of daytime serials permit their fans to make claims about ownership of the narrative. The on-going, open-ended narrative of soap operas requires fans to make substantial cognitive and affective investments to derive value from the product, and fans' participation in public sites for discussion and criticism in effect make them co-authors or co-producers of the narrative.

In an industry where judgments about the quality of a product can only be made post hoc (DiMaggio, 1977), fans feel as qualified as the program suppliers to pass judgment upon what is always a work-in-progress. When it appears to them that the soap narrative has broken continuity or lost emotional authenticity, fans are quick to claim that they are better qualified than the serial's producers to evaluate the quality of the product and the production process itself.

From the producers' perspective, fan participation in ancillary discourse would be nothing more than an unintended byproduct of the production process were it not for the emergence of public sites, in particular, daytime magazines and BBSs, that increasingly give collective voice and confer legitimacy upon viewers' claims to ownership of the serial's narrative. The decision made by soap opera magazines to incorporate a greater "fan voice," combined with the astonishing growth and popularity of electronic bulletin boards in the mid-1990s, has allowed for public, autonomous fan criticism that sustains geographically dispersed fan communities and reinforces fans' sense that their claims are valid.

Those in the production community are increasingly aware of their audience's newfound voice but are ambivalent about how to manage it. On the one hand, expanding the size of the audience, and thus potential advertising revenues, depends on the preferences of the *marginal* viewer, not those of the loyal fan (Owen & Wildman, 1992). And when the demographics of the loyal viewership no longer correspond to advertisers' preferences, producers may find it economically rational to abandon that audience in pursuit of the audience that commands a premium from advertisers. On the other hand, producers do so at their own peril, because in the soap medium viewer loyalty is difficult to build, and once betrayed is difficult to recover. Moreover, the feedback and criticism that accompanies fans' claims to narrative ownership can include valid information that can be considered a productive input into the production process. Thus, the potential exists for writers and producers of soap operas to draw upon fans as co-producers at the same time that they attempt to protect their own autonomy and interests in the contest over ownership.

The expansion of these new sites in the mid-1990s has created an instability in the inherent conflict of interest between fans on the one hand and producers on the other. Fans feel more qualified to pass judgment on all aspects of the narrative, from how well it invokes the genre's conventions to its emotional authenticity, creating an inherent conflict between their aesthetically-based interests and the commercial concerns of the serials' producers. In other cultural realms, professional critics mediate the relationship between producers and consumers and impose a degree of stability on that conflict because of the legitimacy conferred on them as arbiters of the cultural product (Cameron, 1995). However, in the daytime serial genre, professional critics occupy an ambiguous role, because neither the fan "connoisseurs" nor the mass audience defer to their judgment. Thus, the rapid growth of electronic forums as public, autonomous sites for fan criticism poses a serious threat to producer control of the marketplace. Operating in a context of instability and uncertainty (DiMaggio, 1977), it is unlikely that producers will passively concede to fans the legitimate right to pass judgment on the quality of what they produce. As a result, program suppliers' ambitious efforts to gain a presence in electronic forums is, at least in part, an attempt to assert their control over access to information and over who has the means and the right to voice legitimate criticism. However, the technical and social organization of the new electronic media have, so far, limited producers' capacity to do so.

What remains to be seen is whether producers and soap journalists can accommodate to a shift in the balance of power that grants more autonomy, control, and legitimate claims to "ownership" to fan communities. It is not unusual to find publicity photos, series logos, and even video frames from a soap uploaded to fan-supported sites. Producers can choose to openly cooper-

ate with these forums, treat them with benign neglect, or pursue them vigorously for copyright and licensing infringement. It is too soon to tell whether producers will decide it is possible to retain and build a mass audience and write off increasingly cohesive fan communities who aggressively and publicly pursue their claims to ownership of the narrative. Meanwhile, the autonomy afforded by the expansion of electronic sites will continue to support an increasingly legitimated and empowered fan community that will vigorously press claims to ownership over "their" narrative.

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Notes

[1] The eight major U.S. publications covering daytime serials between January, 1995 and December, 1997 were: *Soap Opera Digest, Soap Opera Magazine, Soap Opera Update, Soap Opera Now, Soap Opera News, Soaps In Depth, Daytime TV,* and *Soap Dish.*

[2] To assess the generalizability of themes that appear in quotes from electronic bulletin boards, we did keyword searches on an archive of the population of Usenet newsgroup postings (web3.dejanews.com).

[3] Harrington and Bielby (1995a) also analyzed responses to a mail survey questionnaire completed by 706 self-identified fans and relied upon detailed follow-up interviews with 21 respondents who had varied experience and levels of involvement in the soap fan world. See the methodological Appendix in Harrington and Bielby (1995a) for a full description of their research design.

[4] Only those interview subjects who waived anonymity are identified by name. When drawing from fan magazines, we identify daytime producers, writers, and actors by name and title, as they appeared in the original source. We identify writers of published fan letters by the name of the publication and date of the issue in which the letter appears. Most magazines do not publish fans' full names. Instead, initials, partial names, or the phrase "Name Withheld by Request" typically accompany the published letter. BBS excerpts are identified by location and date of posting only.

[5] In late 1994 *Soap Opera Digest* reported a total paid circulation of 1,607,500 while *Soap Opera Weekly* reported 523,579 copies sold. The market for daytime magazines is so robust that in early 1997, three new publications were launched: *Soap Dish, Soaps In Depth,* and *Soap Opera News*