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# A Qualitative Investigation into the Active Level of Perception of Dissociation of Source from Content Under Narrative Conditions

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A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO THE ACTIVE LEVEL OF PERCEPTION  
OF DISSOCIATION OF SOURCE FROM CONTENT UNDER NARRATIVE  
CONDITIONS

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**THESIS APPROVAL**  
**SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATION**

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To my Professors, Cheryl Bracken, Gary Pettey, & Elizabeth Babin: For your patience, mentorship, and example of personal excellence, you have my lasting affection and gratitude.

A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION INTO THE ACTIVE LEVEL OF PERCEPTION  
OF DISSOCIATION OF SOURCE FROM CONTENT

WILLIAM J. WEAVER

**ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores what media users perceive about the authors and creators of narrative media based solely on the content of that media itself. It contrasts traditional notions of source credibility (established via rhetoric or debate) versus models of media effects which exert themselves through mere exposure to message, and where a direct evaluation of the message source may be neither salient nor possible. A sample of nine undergraduates were individually interviewed in order to investigate the thematic trends associated with the perceptions of credibility and of authorial source while exposed to narrative. The interviews gave rise to the notion that narratives are subject to credibility judgments based on the emotional salience of the characters' responses plot elements, rather than on the factuality of the material, or rather than upon any perceptions of authorial expertise with regards to the subjects broached by the narrative.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*“As soon as a fact is narrated... the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death...”* - Roland Barthes, structural linguist, semiotician & philosopher, 1977.

*“I’m a big fan of just trying to make the audience not aware that there is a crew directing and all this other stuff going on [the set]. Quentin Tarantino movies always bother me because I’d always feel his presence. I don’t think about the characters, I just think about the guy who’s imagining everything.”* - Paris Barclay, television director, 2010.

This thesis is an inquiry into what one actively perceives about the creators of narratives based solely on the exposure to those narratives alone. When encountering stories, what (if anything) is one aware of about that story’s creator? Who or what does one perceive to be the source of a story while experiencing it, and how are credibility judgments made about that source? Are there any specific features of narratives that lead to greater or lesser awareness of source?

A large and diverse body of empirical study within communication science centers upon media effects. In particular, exposure to television and film has been theorized to “cultivate” specific attitudes and beliefs about the world (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Gerbner, 1996), homogenize cultures and erode diverse points-of-view (Gerbner, 1998), “prime” viewers toward receptivity for specific journalistic content

(Iyengar, 1997), and “mainstream” attitudes toward socially marginal behaviors through narrative depictions of those behaviors as normative (Shanahan, 1998); these are a few prominent examples.

Yet, the impact of media effects (on attitudes, beliefs, and their accompanying behaviors) runs counter to established modes of rhetorical persuasion/attitude change. Take the case of “cultivation;” the theory posits that exposure to stories on television (including fiction and TV news) results in individuals forming exaggerated ideas about the prevalence of crime and violence in society, leading to a fear of and negative attitude towards one’s neighbors known as “mean world syndrome” (Gerbner, 1998). If an individual tried to directly persuade another that crime was widespread and danger was always immanent (via means of rhetoric or debate), that individual’s credibility would be evaluated based on his/her credentials, display of expertise on the subject, quality of argument, perceived motives and character, and personal social desirability (Perloff, 2008, pp. 190-232). Under the model of rhetoric, the impact of the argument (and its ability to influence attitude change) hinges largely on the receiver’s perception of the source of the message.

However, media effects such as “cultivation” or “mainstreaming” seem to exert themselves without any of the scrutiny of source associated with traditional models of attitude change. Mere exposure to television stories constitutes sufficient conditions for the range of media effects to become manifest.

A current (and positive) example of media effects at work is “entertainment-education” (E-E). E-E is the popular practice of embedding prosocial messages into entertainment media content with the intent of influencing behavior (Moyer-Gus, 2008);

this is essentially a well-meaning use of “mainstreaming.” Such initiatives may be launched by the collaborative action of various advocacy groups and media creators, and have been successfully used around the globe (Larson, 2009). E-E utilizes narrative to create issue salience through involvement with the story and characters, rather than by utilizing direct persuasive rhetoric. Hether, Huang, Beck, Murphy, & Valente (2008) document a 2005 initiative between the National Cancer Institute, the Hollywood, Health, and Society program at the University of Southern California, and the producers of the television shows *ER* and *Grey’s Anatomy*. In collaboration with one another, the participants in the initiative launched an arc of breast cancer awareness storylines across successive nights. This intervention led to increases in knowledge about screening and treatment among primetime television viewers. Yet, under the E-E concept, public assimilation of these prosocial messages is not in response to the expertise of the authors of the initiative; it is a factor of engaging with the story (Moyer-Gus, 2008). This transfer of persuasiveness from source to content is of particular value when working with adolescents who may be more likely to adopt positive health related behaviors and attitudes as a factor of emotional involvement and social identification with characters in a story, rather than as a response to an argument made by an authority figure (Guttman, Israelashvili, & Gesser-Edlesburg, 2008).

However, these same attributes carry risk as well. Citing the example of false news stories written in the Iraqi media by US operatives in 2005, Perloff (2008) notes that the separation of a message from its source is an inherent attribute of political propaganda; a second attribute of propaganda is the attempt to achieve “mass influence through mass media” (p.33), just as E-E seeks to do. McCombs and Estrada (1997)

observe that our own American journalistic sources may employ thematic and narrative transfers of salience from one issue to another based on their specific interests (p. 237), using a similar application of story and emotional engagement as is found in entertainment-education. In such circumstances, it may be a matter of public necessity that viewers are able to distinguish between perceptions of credibility that derive from content rather than source. However, in both the case of E-E and political propaganda, it seems that a similar mechanism works to deflect an awareness of the message's source credibility from the author to the material itself.

There is a conceptual background for this phenomenon: In 1949, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver proposed their Transmission Model of Communication. The model formalized a process of message exchange that seems nearly tautological when examined on the surface: An information source crafts a message, encodes it for transmission through a channel, and transmits it to a receiver/decoder that delivers it to its destination (Chandler, 2010). This model satisfies conditions of cause-and-effect: messages originate from an identifiable source and pass through a conceptually distinct channel; any ambiguity in the nature of the message or its origin is due simply to noise. As such, the quality, reputation, and intention of the source could be assumed to readily available for the scrutiny of the receiver. Source credibility (and the veracity of a message's information content) was considered a factor of direct evaluation of that source's overt qualities and presentation skill (Hovland, 1957). These direct and logical notions set the frame for early scientific studies of persuasion via rhetoric, highlighting a source's social value and appearance of authority (Sherif & Hovland, 1961) and the ordering of the information presented (Hovland, 1957) as prime determinants of the receiver's attitude

toward that source, and by extension, toward the quality of information the source presented.

### **1.1 Dissociation of Source and Content: A Background**

In that same year of 1949, Hovland and his colleagues Lumsdaine and Sheffield discovered a noteworthy phenomenon which they referred to as a “sleeper effect:” a manifestation of attitude change/information assimilation that displays a greater delayed effect than an initial effect (Allen & Stiff, 1989). As part of an experiment involving propaganda exposure and source credibility, Hovland’s team had shown a story-driven “Army orientation” film called *The Battle of Britain* to two experimental groups. One condition viewed the film after a high credibility source introduction; the second viewed the same film with a low credibility source introduction (Schulman & Worrall, 1970). As expected, the high-credibility introduction yielded an initially higher persuasive effect. However, when the same respondents were retested three weeks later, the perceived credibility of the differing sources seemed to have equalized, with no impact on the assimilation of the story details; indeed, the persuasive impact of the film increased in both high and low credibility conditions nine weeks after the respondents first viewed it (Priester, Wegner, Petty, & Fabrigar, 1999). Hovland and his colleagues continued exploring the issue through 1953. They concluded that under lower credibility conditions, most individuals would be initially inclined to dismiss both the source and the information presented by that source. However, over time, audiences forget the message’s source while still remembering the content, thusly “dissociating” the message’s content from the low credibility judgments attached to the now-psychologically-separate low credibility source (Allen & Stiff, 1989).

### **1.1.1 Telepresence, Attitude Change, and Narrative**

At the time, Hovland and his colleagues made no special notice of the narrative-driven nature of *The Battle of Britain*. In the intervening years, however, a growing body of current research has centered on persuasion through narrative. Specifically, the phenomenon known as “presence” or “telepresence” which can be thought of as a feeling of “being there” when exposed to media, resulting in the “perceptual illusion of nonmediation” (Lombard & Ditton, 1997) has demonstrated associations with attitude change in political communication (Iyengar & McGrady, 2005), health messages (Murphy, Frank, Moran, & Woodley, 2009; Stitt & Nabi, 2005), advertising (Escalas, 2007) “entertainment education” targeted at social issues (Slater, 2002), and even behavioral assimilation (Appel, 2009). Other studies have observed and demonstrated that entirely fictional narratives can inspire lasting beliefs about the world (Appel, 2008; Hall, 2006), and that the persuasive effects and perceived veracity of information in these narratives actually increases over time while the source of the information becomes increasingly less clearly remembered (Appel, 2008; Appel & Richter, 2007).

In contrast to the clear scrutiny that a receiver may bear toward a message source in the Shannon-Weaver Transmission model, the condition of a narrative seems to be different. Semiotics scholar Roland Barthes (largely under the influence of Marx and Freud) has suggested that narratives are essentially “authorless” in nature (1971). As we experience a story, we “drift” into it and away from ourselves (Barthes, 1973), interacting with the content as if it were our own experience or own memory (Escalas, 2007). This sensation of authorless-ness is well described by Lombard and Ditton’s conception of telepresence as “the illusion of nonmediation” (1997). Applied to the presence concept

(and a related concept referred to as “transportation”) (Green & Brock, 2000), Barthes’ comments would suggest that not only does presence distance one from the perception of mediation (through a technological source, television screen, or book), but from the perception of the existence of a *mediator* (author or originator of the media’s content) as well. Put another way, the illusion that there is no communication medium at work carries the implicit suggestion that there is no source attributable for the content that medium is delivering. Neuendorf and Lieberman further elucidate this aspect of presence, remarking that the “illusion of nonmediation... begs the question—mediation between receiver and *what?*” (2010, p. 10). Under the Shannon-Weaver model, a mediated communications is still a message between receiver and source. Neuendorf and Lieberman’s question carries that implication that messages received during an experience of presence may be perceived as lacking an awareness of source at all.

Nevertheless, this lack of crisp access to evaluating a narrative’s source seems to have no reliably negative effect on the persuasiveness of narratives. When encountering a story (perhaps even before presence takes hold), a receiver may or may not recognize giving thought to the story’s source as relevant (Whitbred, Weaver, Bracken, & Skalski, 2011). Nor is the source necessarily evident, as is the case with producers and writers of “episodic” and “thematic” news narratives whose roles remain unseen behind the face of the anchor (Iyengar, 1997). Indeed, the absence of source attribution has even been associated with increased perceptions of credibility in online news stories and web sites offering non-specialized content (Traci, 2006; Kioussis, 2003; Warnick, 2004). In light of Hovland’s detection of persuasive effects due to the “dissociation” of source from

content, this trend seems to suggest that the source that is perceived as most credible is the one that is perceived the least.

### **1.1.2 Presentation Features and Distributed Credibility**

Warnick (2004) has suggested that rather than questions of credibility simply being ignored in these instances, receiver perceptions of source credibility become “distributed” across the formal features of the web site’s presentation. That is to say, rather than through evaluation the credentials of an online news story’s author, one derives sensations of credibility from the design layout, the use and size of images, the graceful positioning of white-space, and even the typeface and fonts selected (Corrigan & Stephens, 2007). These are structural features which constitute something akin to a grammar, standing apart from/prior to any content features of the media. Related studies focusing on these “presentation features” (Bracken, 2006) *via-a-vi* exposure to television demonstrate associations with credibility and variables such as standard definition *vs.* HD (Bracken, 2006), and the outer labeling of video monitors as news or fiction regardless of the actual nature of the content (Green, Garst, Brock, & Chung, 2006; Jensen, Coe, & Tewksbury, 2006).

## **1.2 Literature Review**

In order to define the specific scope of the dissociation of source from content while exposed to narratives, it is necessary to explore the distinct elements that are bound up with it. These include source, credibility, presence, and narrative.

### **1.2.1 Defining “Source”**

The beginning of the message chain, the source, seems to offer relatively little ambiguity between its nominal and conceptual usages. Merriam-Webster lists a definition



as “a generative force,” and “one that supplies information” (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, 2010). While the notion of a communication source as a “generative force” offers a level of ambiguity that foreshadows the work of Barthes, the second definition seems far more concrete. “One that supplies information” is a near-perfect descriptor for how the term “source” is used in the Shannon-Weaver model: “One” implies an entity of some kind (individual or corporate), who “supplies” (implying the existence of a receiver) “information” (“information” being the message).

Hovland and his team did not deviate from this usage, but expanded it to identify potential sources as “persons, groups, or media” that originate a message, “an endorser who is cited in the message, or the channel through which the message is transmitted” (Hovland, Janis, & Kelley, 1953). Their addition of “an endorser” to the message implies the connection of credibility to source (which they will develop in detail over their careers), while the recognition of channel as an aspect of source raises new possibilities. While it seems that the intent of Hovland *et. al's* use of the term “channel” is in reference to a specific magazine, news paper, or television news bureau that would carry a preexisting reputation (or known social value), a more liberal interpretation could be to identify the media channels themselves (ie: film, television, magazines, etc.) as potential sources proper.

Finally, Brock and Green (2005) summarize the term source as “the person or group that originates the communication intended to persuade another person or group” (p. 352). In its simplicity and specificity, this definition returns us very closely to the nominal usage offered by Merriam-Webster.

### **1.2.2 Credibility**

The vocabulary for recognizing a source's credibility has been continuously emerging since the Athens of the mid-300's BCE. In his study of persuasive rhetoric, Aristotle identifies credibility by the term "ethos," meaning a source's "good character" (Henning, 1998). Taken as a mixture of benevolent social authority and expertise, ethos is that practiced attribute of a message source that inspires a receiver to regard it as having "good sense, good moral character, and goodwill" (Henning, 1998). Even this early definition of credibility as ethos recognizes two important aspects: first, credibility is variable (a source may work to improve its ethos); second, credibility is perceptual in nature. That is to say, it lives in the mind of the receiver. "Credibility," remarks Perloff, "is a psychological or interpersonal communication construct" (2008, p. 221). He goes on to recast Aristotle's three components into a modern vernacular as "(a) expertise, (b) trustworthiness, and (c) goodwill" (2008, p.222).

### **1.2.3 Telepresence: An Overview**

The formal study of telepresence (also referred to as "presence") appears to have emerged as a response to the ubiquitous integration of communication technology into modern life, offering a framework for media scholars to understand the influence of media exposure as experienced through technology (Lombard & Ditton, 1997).

The most often cited definition of telepresence is Lombard and Ditton's seminal 1997 description as the "perceptual illusion of nonmediation" experienced when encountering a technologically mediated message. Bracken and Botta specify further that (tele)presence is "an interaction among the user, the content, and the technology" (2010, p.42). Nor is presence an all-or-nothing experience; rather it is a psychological state

occurring on a continuum (Westerman & Skalski, 2010). Compounded, telepresence may be summarized as a perceptual level of illusion of nonmediation arising from the interaction between user, content, and technology. Communication theorist Marshall McLuhan hinted at this concept as early as 1964, noting that the impacts and effects of interacting with communication technology “do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter... patterns of perception steadily, and without resistance” (p. 33).

However, Matthew Lombard himself (Lombard, 2010) defers to the definition of telepresence promoted by the International Society for Presence Research (ISPR):

Presence... is a psychological state or subjective perception in which even though part or all of an individual’s current experience is generated by and/or filtered through human made technology, part or all of the individual’s perception fails to accurately acknowledge the role of the technology in the experience. Except in the most extreme cases, the individual can indicate correctly that s/he is using technology, but at *some level* and to *some degree* his/her perceptions overlook that knowledge, objects, events, and environments are perceived as if the technology was not involved in the experience (International Society for Presence Research, 2000).

The ISPR’s description goes on to distinguish between levels/hierarchies of mediation. “First order” mediated experience is the world as one perceives it mediated only by the senses (no technological mediation), whereas “second order” mediated experiences constitute those that do involve encounter with communication technology (2000). By this token, telepresence occurs when one accepts a second order mediated

experience to a first order one. Finally, ISPR recognizes telepresence as an individual-level variable, and as being specific to a real-time encounter with technology—it does not occur in anticipation of or following such an encounter.

Bracken and Botta (2010) cite a 2008 expansion of this definition by Bracken, Pettey, Rubenking and Guha, noting that the suspension of the sense of mediation is voluntary and done “in order to feel a sense of connection with the mediated content they are using... This state is often influenced by the expectation of the technology, the media content and the characteristics of the media user” (p. 42).

Lombard and Ditton identified six differing types/aspects/sub-dimensions of telepresence in their 1997 work. “Presence as social richness” describes the degree to which a medium may be perceived to reflect intimacy, immediacy, and social warmth. “Presence as realism” refers to the degree to which a medium can render representations that appear/feel authentic to the receiver. “Presence as transportation” is the sense of being brought into the mediated world, in favor of our real surroundings. “Presence as immersion” concerns the submersion of the active senses in the mediated material, and the degree to which input from the non-mediated environment is blocked out. “Presence as social actor within a medium” refers to the illusion of interacting with characters and personalities in media as if they were authentic social actors rather than simple content. This is often referred to as “parasocial interaction” (Hall, Wilson, Wiesner, & Cho, 2007; Tian & Hoffner, 2007) and may include imagined scenarios wherein an individual enters the story world to experience it alongside the characters, or where that individual imagines one or more characters as taking part in his/her real life. Lastly, “presence as

medium as social actor” recognizes the tendency of treating the technology itself (such as one’s phone or computer) as an interactive entity.

### **1.2.3.1 Features of the Transportation Dimension, Expanded**

Transportation is inseparable from any investigation of telepresence and narrative. Lombard and Ditton describe transportation as “perhaps the oldest form of presence” (1997), linking it to the narratives of ancient shaman and the paintings on the cave walls of our ancestors. Put succinctly, transportation is a process whereby the narrative flow of a story draws one into the story’s world, resulting in a degree of temporary loss to “real facts from the real world” (Taylor, 2008). Like the shamans and cave painters of antiquity, this is the experience that Barthes described as “drift”, where a reader becomes a spider who “dissolves” in the web of the narrative, actively attending to his or her encounter with the story even as the self is forgotten (1973); McLuhan referred to it as “autoamputation,” where we cut off any extensions of ourselves as we focus in on a medium (1964).

This element of focus described by McLuhan is of particular note. Green (2005) relates transportation to a Zen-like experience called “flow.” When subsumed in the flow state, one is both actively and completely absorbed in a task and immune to distractions of sense or thought, resulting in a condition of “optimal experience” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Whereas the flow state is typified by freedom from distraction, the transportation state represents a level of separation from the immediate access to perception of real-world sensory experience of one’s surroundings and a limiting of access to cognitions not related to the content of the story world. This “convergent mental process” trains attention to the mediated content in “an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and

feelings” (Green & Brock, 2000). The notion of convergence/integration is further developed by Csikszentmihalyi, who remarks that under flow (and by extension, transportation) “emotions, intentions, and thoughts do not pass through consciousness as separate strands of experience, but they are constantly interconnected and modify each other as they go along” (1997, p. 26). Using the terminology of the ISPR, transportation is the process whereby individuals apply maximum, integrative cognitive focus toward experiencing a *second order* mediated encounter with a story as a *first order* one. Bassett goes so far as to liken the experience to a “fugue” state (2007, p. 13), where one’s identity disperses and is even replaced by features of the story. Oatley concurs, noting, “at one end is transportation... at the other is transformation: fiction can change the self” (2002, p. 43).

### **1.2.3.2 Telepresence and Persuasion**

Because the transportation effect limits access to one’s mental life outside of what is relevant to the story/experience, Green and Brock identified transportation as having a powerful impact on beliefs (2000). Not only is one less able to access facts to counterargue material presented in the narrative, but emotional involvement and identification with character impose a context where such access is unnecessary for (and even detrimental to) processing the experience. Indeed, in keeping with the ISPR’s description of presence as a real-time event, access to non-story-relevant cognitions should serve to break the transportation experience, reminding one of the second order nature of the media.

In order to set the frame for persuasion via presence, Green and Brock postulated the Transportation-Imagery Model (TIM) in 2002. The TIM argues five positions. First,

“narrative persuasion” is, in fact, limited exclusively to narratives/stories (not argumentative rhetoric) that invoke images and beliefs. Second, belief change occurs to the extent that the receiver is experiencing transportation. Third, the propensity to experience transportation is an individual difference (referred to as “transportability”), subject to variability. Fourth, transportation is dependent on content variables such as adherence to narrative format and quality of presentation. Fifth and finally, the level of transportation is impacted by features of the media (what Bracken refers to as “presentation variables”) such as screen size and image resolution, and the context of the presentation (such as a public presentation event *vs.* a solitary encounter) (Green & Brock, 2005, p. 125). The possibility of being influenced by transportation becomes an outgrowth of all these factors. The TIM has found support in numerous general studies (Appel & Richter, 2010; Murphy, Frank, Moran, & Woodley, 2009; Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008), as well as those relating directly to entertainment education (Hether, Huang, Beck, Murphy, & Valente, 2008; Moyer-Gus, 2008).

### **1.2.3.3 Roles of Emotion in Telepresence**

An emerging aspect of transportation is its connection to emotion. “Fictional narrative,” writes Oatley, “has its impact primarily through the emotions” (2002, p. 39). Green and Brock make easy mention of emotion as a natural feature of narrative encounter and as a component of the “convergent processes” conceptually involved in transportation (2000), but they do not incorporate it into the TIM in any specific way. Still, Oatley suggests that emotion is the driving force whereby transportation exerts its effects, with each individual receiver’s emotions aroused spontaneously as she or he engages with the material.

Appel and Richter (2010) go farther, offering emotion as a moderator for the transportation effect proper. They center their model on the work of Maio and Esses' concept "need for affect" (NFA) (2001). Rather than treating emotions as reflexive, NFA is defined as "the general motivation of people to approach or avoid situations and activities that are emotion inducing for themselves or others," or as "individual differences in the *motivation* to seek out emotions" (Maio & Esses, 2001). Appel & Richter treat NFA as constituting a trait-level sensitivity to persuasion via narrative. Trying into the third postulate of the Green and Brock's TIM, need for affect becomes a direct moderator for transportability, where those higher in NFA will demonstrate a stable likelihood to experience deeper levels of transportation; in turn, they will be more likely to adopt story consistent beliefs. They refer to this as the "mediated moderation model," for narrative persuasion; persuasion is mediated by transportation, and transportation is moderated by NFA. Apple and Richter's experiments supported their model, prompting them to observe, "The more people are inclined to approach emotional situations, the more their beliefs are shifted towards information that is woven into the plot of a narrative," and "the experiential state of transportation... is the mediator by which need for affect exerts its role as moderator of narrative persuasion" (2010).

#### **1.2.4 Features of Narrative**

With so much centered around narrative in the transportation literature, there is remarkably little explication of the concept therein. Green and Brock refer back to Aristotle and his *Poetics*, and identify quality writing and construction organized in a story "with a beginning, middle and end—during which characters may encounter a crisis or crises" (2002, p. 117). This description is conveyed in work as recent as Appel and



Richter (2010) and Whitbred, *et. al* (2011), and it corresponds to a literary/critical perspective that regards narrative as the force and structure by which a plot line unfolds, and which may be “any account of events, actual or invented, recited in any way, by any means, for any audience, toward any end” (Lieberman & Foster, 1968, p. 75.).

The concept of narrative falls under the prevue of structural linguistics as well. Spearheaded largely by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, structural linguistics concerned itself with the study of the meta-foundations of language (Audi, 1995, p. 882). This view regards language as a “closed system:” a repository of signifiers (its vocabulary), that can be arranged in certain ways, but who’s ultimate usage is constrained and determined by a grammar (structure) that cannot be altered through use of the language’s vocabulary. As such, the construction of “utterances” becomes a highly formalized activity, where the interpretation of statements (made up of vocabulary) becomes possible insofar as the word construction is reflective of the “perceptual invariates” which constitute an otherwise invisible grammar (Carroll, 1964). Carroll continues, stating that these perceptual invariates/grammatical structures “may be thought of as the basis of thought and language” (1964, p. 78).

The narrative structure as described by Green and Brock (2000), and others as a story with a beginning, middle and end is exactly such a structure. Narrative is a grammar; a “set of structural/formal features” (Sanders-Jackson, 2009) that orders the content of the story (the specifics of plot, setting, and character) into a recognizable form. Again, these features (act structure, chronology, presence of conflict, climax) are separate and apart from the story itself; they exist objectively, “unrelated to the experience of the reader” (Sanders-Jackson, 2009). They are akin to the resolution depth of a television

monitor, or the quality of audio in a film presentation. Content is experienced through these aspects; they impose context upon the story features in order that they become interpretable as content (Bassett, 2007 p. 11), but they are not content themselves. They focus story features into what Warnick calls a “narrative probability”—the tendency for plot elements and themes to complement one another and hold together (1987).

Neuendorf and Lieberman allude to narrative as a grammar, describing a “hidden architecture of the narrative” that “works along with an invisible narration that makes the story appear to be just unfolding before the eyes of the viewer” (2010, p. 28). They also observe that stories that deviate too much from this grammar become disengaging for audiences. They call attention to their construction by forcing it to be visible rather than transparent (2010, pp. 27-28). This aspect of narrative experience has led Sanders-Jackson to suggest that transportation can be understood as a measure of how well a story expresses its hidden structure (2009), or how close to the structural ideal for a narrative a given story is. Indeed, if one varies too far from that structural ideal, the illusion of nonmediation collapses; like Paris Barclay, we cannot see the characters or their world. Transportation is interrupted and our attention shifts to an awareness “of the guy who’s imagining all this” (2010). This implies the possibility that experiences of transportation are antithetical to active perceptions of the story’s source.

#### **1.2.4.1 Narrative as “Work” vs. “Text”**

Given that source perception and narrative engagement (transportation) seem to be opposed, the question arises as to what (if anything) one considers about a story’s source while engrossed in it. Roland Barthes, a structural linguist, dealt with this question during the 1970’s. He felt that (then) recent intellectual turns toward Freud were leading

people psychoanalyze stories as a means of accessing the mental lives of their sources/authors. In Barthes' opinion, that trend was inappropriate; he found it a lavishly bourgeois (and outmoded) view of authorship. He declared:

Just as Einsteinian science demands that the relativity of the frames of reference be included in the object studied, so the combined action of Marxism, Freudianism, and structuralism demands in literature the relativization of the relations of the writer, reader, and observer (critic). Over against the traditional notion of the work... there is now the requirement of a new object, obtained by the sliding or overturning of former categories. That object is the Text. (1971).

By "work," Barthes is referring to the story as written by a source; a work is a product of an individual. However, he argues, that narratives (he includes poems, as well), cannot be experienced as works. Rather, they become "Texts." Texts are met as a "stereographic plurality of signifiers" (1971), which interact uniquely with each individual that encounters them. Bassett elaborates on this notion, identifying narratives as an unfixed, continuously unfolding "arc of emplotment" that "reaches back into the horizon of the event and forward into the horizon of the reader," allowing the receiver to interpret the Text "through a form of assembly that is not retrospective in process, not necessarily linear but rather expansive, and that is certainly open and indeed *generative*" (2007, p. 3). From this perspective, when one encounters a narrative, one does not enter into a dialog with its source/author—one enters into a dialog with the Text itself.

Psychologically, the Text is perceived as essentially sourceless: a product of overlapping and spontaneous signifiers spun "from innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes, 1977),

and without any of the intentionality which may be attributable to a “work” (Warnick, 2004).

Returning then to Neuendorf and Lieberman’s question asking that presence is the illusion of nonmediation “between receiver and *what?*”(2010), we may now answer. Insofar as the mediated material is narrative, presence is the perceptual illusion of nonmediation between a receiver *and a Text*.

### **1.3 Questions for Research**

The cited background literature implies the possibility that dissociation of source from content may be a natural product of the cognitive processing of narratives, possibly as an outgrowth of the mingling of presence, emotion, and the structure of language. While this background information does not offer any definitive answers as to why source and content may become disparate, it does give rise to questions as to what individuals actually experience about the credibility of information when presented in stories, and what (if anything) is communicated about the source of the story while one is absorbed in it.

RQ1: What makes a story and its content credible to a viewer or reader?

RQ2: What do people think about the creators of stories based solely on the content of the stories themselves?

## CHAPTER II

### METHODS

#### **2.1 Participants**

Nine undergraduate students recruited from communication courses were interviewed in exchange for extra credit or toward the fulfillment of class requirements. The sample included five (5) men and four (4) women, ranging from sophomore to senior class rank. Their ages ranged from 20 – 25, with an average age of 23 years-old (Specific data is listed in Appendix D of this document.). Some common favorite stories included the “Twilight” series of films and novels, and the television shows “Dexter,” “True Blood,” “30 Rock,” and “Law & Order: SVU,” but the answers also included heterogeneous content unique to each respondent. Television was the most preferred media channel, followed by Netflix/online streaming, written text, theatrical film presentations, and finally video games. Many respondents described coming to like these stories due to repeated exposure, rather than to an immediate attraction to the material.

#### **2.2 Procedure**

Each participant was interviewed using a general script consisting of eight loose questions and numerous potential sub-questions (probes) reflecting possible avenues the participants may steer the conversation. The discussions were audio-recorded with full awareness and permission of the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes.

### 2.2.1 Interview Questions and Rationale

The questions were formed to draw out thematic coordinates relating to respondents' general determinants of the content's credibility, as well as their active perceptions of story creators (in the genres and media channels of their preference and choosing). They were:

1. *What are some of your favorite stories?* This question served a twofold purpose: Primarily, the question is meant to insure that the respondents were discussing narratives that they had attended to, and which made them experience presence. Secondly, the question was intended to paint an overview of genre preferences across the sample of respondents, as well as offer the possibility of exploring common themes among the favorite shows of the participants.

2. *What about stories makes them believable to you?* and 3. *What about stories makes them unbelievable to you?* These questions were asked to draw out both positive and negative general notions of credibility (the word "believable" being used as a conversational substitute for "credible"), whether those notions came from active apprehension of source (Perloff, 2008), perceptions of the Text as "authorless" (Bassett, 2007; Barthes, 1977), experiences of presence (ISPR, 2000; Lombard & Ditton, 1997), or any other factor not described by prior studies.

4. *What about your favorite stories makes you connect with them?* This question was intended to explore participants' attraction to stories and the elements that made them meaningful to them, possibly including (but not limited to) telepresence as parasocial interaction (Hall, Wilson, Wiesner, & Cho, 2007; Tian & Hoffner, 2007), telepresence as a motivation to connect with a story (Bracken, Pettay, Rubenking, &

Guha, 2008), and engagement with narrative to meet an individual “Need for Affect” (Appel, 2009).

5. *Do you pay much attention to the production quality of TV shows and films? As credibility has been quantitatively associated with the formal features of media (Bracken, 2006; Warnick, 2004) and with the formal features of media and presence together (Bracken, 2006), the question’s purpose was to draw out general descriptions of this process at work among the participants.*

6. *Do you get a sense of what the creators of your favorite stories are like personally just from the stories themselves? This question was intended to illuminate the tensions between Barthes’ (1977) conception of narrative as perceptually lacking a source (“authorless”) and the classical notions of source credibility evaluation as described and updated by Perloff (2008).*

7. *Why do you think the creators of your favorite shows made them? Intentionality, such as “goodwill” is described as an important aspect of source credibility (Perloff, 2008). Any active perceptions of sources’ intentions may suggest that something like a classical evaluation of source is directly at work among the respondents.*

8. *This study is about looking into what we think about the creators of stories just from the stories themselves. What do you think you can know about the creators of stories just from the stories themselves? Finally, the participants were directly informed about the study’s intended subject; they were then asked to comment specifically. The decision to reveal the purpose of the interviews stems from opinion formation research surrounding the 1948 US Presidential election; researchers conducted a series of interviews following a general script and concluding with a full explanation of their*

work. The specific comments surrounding the full explanation became useful in interpreting the other more general responses (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). A similar question was included in the present study in the hope of generating a similar result, and possibly illuminating avenues for further research.

### **2.2.2 Coding Methodology**

The details of each interview (in summary textual form) were reviewed and color coded based on thematic content and saturation of terms used commonly by all participants.

### **2.3 Data Analysis Methodology: Grounded Theory**

As this study centers on the phenomenology (rather than the mechanics) of the dissociation of source from content, a grounded theory approach was selected for interpretation of the interview data. Chesebro and Borisoff describe a grounded theory analysis as one where the characteristics of the phenomenon in question are permitted to emerge “inductively from the data,” rather than via a deductive process of predetermined hypothesis testing (2007). Chesebro and Borisoff further state, “the aim is to identify the meaning people construct” as opposed to confirmation of objective criteria surrounding the topic in question, and that data should reveal “categories” of themes rather than simply aggregate the experiences of the respondents (2007). It is from this perspective (categories of themes) that the data are presented.



## CHAPTER III

### RESULTS

#### **3.1 Credibility as Emotional Salience: Thematic Categories of RQ1**

The first series of questions asked respondents to describe their notions of what made a story credible. Every participant used some variation on the phrase “I need to be able to relate emotionally,” (Frank) or “the relate-ability of the characters” (Mary). This trend seemed of central importance to the participants (both in terms of the credibility of the material and their ability to enjoy it). Consistent descriptions emerged of credibility being tied to both identification with one or more characters in the story, and to the perceived authenticity of the portrayals of all characters’ emotional consequences with regard to plot elements (how well those emotions resonated with real-world expectations). This combination of (1) identification with character and (2) emotional resonance (perceived authenticity of emotional responses to plot) may be thought of as “emotional salience:” the phenomenon whereby individuals accept the world of the story (“relate” to it) through identification and emotional resonance.

##### **3.1.1 Identification Explored**

Reinhard (2005) describes two different forms of identification. The first (referred to as “simple identification”) is built upon a viewer’s awareness of similarity between self and a character; this similarity usually takes the form of homophily-related factors

for children (primarily physical resemblances and shared activities) and shared psychological traits and dispositions for adults. “Tess” described identifying with the titular character from “Alice in Wonderland” when she was a child based on her physical resemblance to that character (“She had blonde hair, I had blond hair—that could be me in the forest,” she said.), but came to identify more with the interdependent friendships depicted on “Friends” after becoming an adult; “Mary” identified herself in the drunken antics of reality show housewives; “Mark” saw his family reflected in the family lives of Jane Austen’s characters. Each of these respondents described realistic and recognizable depictions of their own experiences in the narrative worlds.

The second aspect of identification, described as “wishful identification” (Tian & Hoffner, 2007) refers to a viewer’s desire to “be like a certain character, or behave in ways similar to the character.” Wishful identification may encompass desired emulation of a character’s activities, outlook, values, level of responsiveness, social circle, and social desirability (Reinhard, 2005). Respondents who experienced this form of identification reported seeing the character as a role model. “Nancy” spoke of her admiration for “Law & Order: SVU’s” “Detective Benson,” describing feeling inspired by her conduct as a woman and as a professional in the world of law enforcement; “Frank” spoke at length about video game heroes modeling a code of conduct that was viable for real life.

Either form of identification may further be described as “dyadic” or “monadic.” Dyadic identification presents itself as an imagined “face-to-face” interplay between the viewer and a character, wherein that viewer imagines him/herself interacting with the character as a friend, either in the character’s story world or in the viewer’s real life

setting (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Nancy's experience of Detective Benson is almost like that of a relationship; Nancy spoke of "knowing her, knowing what she would do," in the same terms one would use to describe real-world intimacy. Tess spoke of interacting with the characters on "Friends," of actually inhabiting their world on a day-to-day basis and getting to know them as one knows a true friend.

This "dyadic" relationship with story characters is another way to describe parasocial interactions as defined by ISPR (2000) and Lombard and Ditton (1997) among the telepresence literature, and its manifestation is regarded as an established link between telepresence and identification (Hall, Wilson, Weisner, & Cho, 2007).

Monadic identification, on the other hand, refers to a viewer imagining the self as the character; in this form, the viewer makes no character-as-other distinction, and imagines the personal attributes of that character explicitly as one's own. "Jane" described credibility experienced through this form of identification, saying, "Rather than reading things on paper, you can experience what the character is experiencing." Frank takes these first-person experiences farther, describing sensations of personal guilt and conscience that govern how he plays his character in video games. Mary described driving these experiences further still, by attempting to join the cast of the reality show "The Bachelor." In so doing, Mary sought to actually enter the narrative world—to transform a set of parasocial interactions into authentically social interactions. Upon learning that she had not made the final selection for the cast, she spoke of watching the episodes and "wondering what could have been" between herself and the Bachelor character.

### **3.1.2 Emotional Resonance Explored**

The second subtheme of emotional salience is emotional resonance (or simply “resonance”). All respondents spoke in detail about the importance of quality acting performance to establishing credibility. Performance was important for not only characters with whom the respondents identified, but across the content as a whole. Andy described this global appropriateness of emotional pitch as creating an “atmosphere” that allowed him to be “drawn in” to the story world, and without which he could not find the narrative credible. John stressed “the attitude of the characters” toward the features of the plot and the authenticity of their responses to those story points. This is a fine distinction: credibility does not apply to the events of the story (all respondents cited at least one fantastical story as a favorite), but to the perceived authenticity of the emotional impact those events have across all the characters therein (even ones with whom the respondents may not identify), and how well those emotions may resonate with real-world expectations. Nancy noted that credibility was part of “the feelings of characters,” rather than to depictions of the world. She specifically mentioned the exaggerated depictions of crime on “CSI” and “Law & Order” as unrealistic, but the emotional lives of the characters in the story worlds felt authentic. “Jeff” even suggested that the more fantastical and unlikely the plot elements, the deeper the resonance becomes because the unrealistic scenarios offer a point of contrast against the realistic portrayals of emotions. He cited the vampire drama “True Blood” as an example, saying that emotion “is the one characteristic that does make us human, and you can relate to it no matter how much fantasy is involved.” A similar sentiment was described by Frank who noted that the galaxy-spanning stakes of his favorite science fiction games make the emotional urgency more compelling rather than less so, and increased the “relate-ability” of the characters.

Even Mary, who had seen the artifice of “The Bachelor” first hand while interacting with the producers and crew during her casting process, felt that the constructed nature of the show did not impact the credibility and resonance of the emotions between the characters. “The feelings are real,” she said, and the reality of those emotions supersedes the unreality of the scenario (such as private dates in abandoned amusement parks) where credibility is concerned.

### **3.2 Perceptions of Source as Interruptions: Thematic Categories of RQ2**

The second set of interview questions were geared toward allowing the emergence of the respondents’ experiences of their perceptions of the creators of their favorite stories. The themes that manifested were uniformly spoken of as unwelcome interruptions or “breaks” in the participants’ pleasurable experiences of the story. These interruptions fell into two subthemes: (1) an unwanted awareness of the formal features of the storytelling craft, and (2) manifestations of a creator’s point of view.

#### **3.2.1 Formal Features as Invisible until They Interrupt**

Many respondents spoke (with strong negativity, even derision) of the experience of “breaks” in the narrative due to overt reminders of the craft associated with the storytelling; these are the classic boom-mic-in-the-shot moments that are often satirized as examples of unprofessional production work. Andy, John, and Jeff all used words to the effect that such moments made it clear that the creators of the content were not “thinking about it,” or not “thinking about it for a long time.” Jeff seemed to relegate material with such characteristics into a separate category of media: “under-produced.” Other descriptions of “under-produced” material included “shoddy,” “weak,” and “mediocre mess.” These are not mere descriptions, but pejoratives.

Poor editing (jump cuts or continuity problems like cigarettes that change length throughout scenes) and garbled sound in visual media, and typos in novels were mentioned as especially jarring and irritating. However, every participant spontaneously cited poor acting as the worst form of story interruption. Frank's description of "wooden" performances or "unnatural" delivery of lines as causing him to quickly lose interest in the material reflects the sentiments of the group as a whole. Mark even added that he could selectively ignore bad writing or bad screenwriting, but acting offered no margin for error.

Bound up with the theme of storytelling-craft-as-interruption is its opposite end: formal features seemed invisible to the participants until they manifested as interruptions, and they would have ideally remained invisible. Most respondents spoke of paying little-to-no attention to the production quality of a film or TV show, unless it was part of the "under-produced" category. Features such as HD, high-end sound, 3D, and theatrical presentation were never mentioned as having had any kind of active influence on the participants' experiences of stories. While all the participants' favorite media displayed high quality flimcraft, it remained invisible to them. This phenomenon was best captured by John, who declared that his favorite TV shows "weren't particularly well made," and then went on to cite two multi-award-winning series as his favorites. When the superlative production quality of those shows was pointed out to him during the conversation, he observed, "I guess that when I see it all in one big picture I don't really pay attention to anything. I just get hooked up in the story, and that's all that matters." This statement captures the essence of the invisible ideal of formal features as reported by the participants.

### **3.2.2 The Author's Point of View: An Unwelcome Distraction**

The first subtheme (interruptions by formal features) is reflective of the corporate nature of media; many different professionals contribute to the final product (actors, editors, productions crew, etc.), and interruptions of this kind were discussed in light of each other and of being of like kind. The second subtheme seems to be exclusively reserved for writers and screenwriters: interruptions in the story experience due to the perception of the author's point-of-view in contrast to that of the characters. These interruptions include the detection of moral messages, issue-related political messages, and gratuitous content (such as violence, nudity, and clumsy humor).

The number of respondents who described this experience were a minority (only four-out-of-nine), but all spoke in strong terms of feeling "manipulated" by the author through the material, and that sense of manipulation constituted a thorough "break" with the ability to enjoy the narrative. John and Nancy particularly spoke at length about feeling that they were trying to be "sold" by story writers on a certain view of the world. Nancy in particular experienced this as an acute interruption between herself and her favorite character Detective Benson. When storylines appeared to advocate political opinions dissonant with her own, Nancy spoke of the series' creator as an unwelcome presence that she endeavored to actively ignore (sometimes unsuccessfully) while continuing to engage with the character.

### **3.3 Direct Response: What Can be Known about Source from Content?**

The final interview question was modeled on Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee's 1948 method of full disclosure: "*This study is about looking into what we think about the*

*creators of stories just from the stories themselves. What do you think you can know about the creators of stories just from the stories themselves?”*

Revealing the nature of the study to the respondents did not spawn a set of organizing themes for the analysis as was intended; this is most likely the case because revealing details and requesting specific comment from the participants breaks the emergent and organic character of grounded theory as described by Chesebro and Borisoff (2007). While the participants answered the question in largely disparate ways, the common theme seemed to be that after a narrative encounter, one is left with something like a casual, cursory introduction to the source.

Frank believed “a slight glimpse” into the source’s personality was possible, but not enough specific information could be discovered to make clear judgments.

John felt that much could be gathered about a writer’s level of subject expertise, and that his/her personality traits could reveal themselves through styles of humor present in the work.

Mary felt that there were genre-specific differences; she claimed little could be known about the producers of television shows from only the content, but felt that the authors of books were “putting themselves out there” and much could be inferred about them including family life, upbringing, circles of friendships, and social desirability. She drew this distinction, saying, “Every writer wants a piece of themselves in their book,” but such considerations were made only after a story has been read. While reading, Mary reported that her vivid impressions were reserved for characters, not authors.

Jane described her deep conviction that outside (supernatural) forces guide narrative encounter, and each individual would bring only what was psychologically



necessary to meet his/her “needs.” She said, “It’s what you bring to it [stories],” that determines what we think about their creators.

Andy felt that writers who afforded their characters dense back-stories (such as “Dexter”) were engaging in a kind of guarded autobiography, filled with tangible specifics of their own lives. However, he seemed hesitant to commit to this answer and expressed his uncertainty with it.

Mark stated that we could gain something akin to “a strong first impression” of an author based on his/her work, but nothing with enough detail to fuel anything beyond intuitions about his/her character.

Nancy felt that one should not “read too much into” what can be known about authors based on their stories. “They’re creative people,” she observed, adding that impressions about sources based on their work could be misleading.

Jeff’s response took the question in a slightly different direction. He stated that an artist has a right to be totally unknown and private, leaving the material to stand alone. However, should that artist feel compelled to insert a point-of-view about ethical or social issues, it was her/his prerogative (and sometimes obligation) to do so. “You can know what they want you to know,” said Jeff.

Tess felt she could get an idea of authors’ interests (based on their chosen subjects), but little beyond that.

Of these responses, Mark’s comparison of perceptions of narrative source to “a strong first impression” seems to encapsulate the others’ views as well. It suggests room for intuition, but excludes the possibility of sufficient details to make reason-based evaluations.

Unfortunately, this “full disclosure” approach did not reveal the nuanced insights into perceptions of narrative source it was intended to prompt. Respondents actually seemed eager to be done with the question and did not wish to engage with it in detail, perhaps due to its incongruity with the rest of the grounded-theory-based interview the respondents had participated in. All the respondents remarked that they never thought about the question before, and that it had no bearing on their ability to enjoy stories.

## CHAPTER IV

### DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

#### **4.1 Thematic Coordinates: Summary**

The principle component binding this sample of interviews appears to be emotion: positive emotions derived from the pleasure of the content (such as Jane's "Amazing" feeling from reading her favorite book), from feeling "drawn into" the story world (as described by Andy), and from being able to emotionally relate the material to one's own life (as described by all). Most respondents described no active perception of source at all. When an active perception of source did emerge it took the form of a sense of interruption, mostly by negative awareness of formal features (Jeff's irritation at "under-produced" material; Tess' distraction at editing jumps and continuity issues), and unwelcome or emotionally incongruous plot elements (John's feeling of writers "selling" the story; Nancy's resistance to political points of view that challenged her own).

In each case, credibility seems to be an outgrowth of emotional salience: a phenomenon whereby individuals accept the conditions of story worlds through identification with character and emotional resonance, respectively. Most respondents identified favorite stories with plot elements that were surreal, fantastic, or derived from science fiction ("Harry Potter," "Twilight," "The Princess Bride," and so forth). Yet these elements were accepted so long as characters were depicted as reacting to plot points in

emotionally plausible ways. Frank fully accepted the science fiction worlds of his video games so long as the characters responded to it in ways he perceived as natural; Mark felt the vampire-werewolf-human love triangle portrayed in the “Twilight” series reflected the emotional reality of his own life. From a demographic, physical, or circumstantial perspective, Frank could not legitimately relate to saving the world from aliens in the far flung future. But he could deeply relate to the story-born emotional consequences of leaving a friend behind in the game world, because those consequences are the same in his real world. Jeff is not a super hero, yet the depiction of racial tolerance shared among the “X-Men” is congruent with his own feelings.

In keeping with this rubric of emotional salience, the most important contributor to the stories’ credibility was the quality of acting. This was a uniform response among the participants, and an unexpected one. Nowhere does the interview script reference acting or performance, nor is it mentioned in existing quantitative literature associating formal features with perceived credibility as offered by Iding, Crosby, Auernheimer, and Klemm (2008), Jensen, Coe, and Tewksbury (2006) or Green, Garst, Brock, and Chung (2006), among others.

Formal features such as image and sound quality, flimcraft (camerawork and editing), and writing quality were mentioned explicitly during the interviews, but the participants typically reported them as having no conscious bearing on perceptions of credibility. Rather, when the respondents did report being aware of formal features, it was associated with negative feelings of interruption and critical reactions to the TV shows or films. Awareness of a writer’s point of view was described as a particularly hostile form

of interruption, and experienced as a gambit to “sell” the viewer on a particular ethical or political stance.

Succinctly, the participants seemed to engage encounter with narratives as an act of comparing their own emotional lives to those of characters. Credibility of the stories emerged through characters responding to story points in ways that demonstrated emotional realism, regardless of the veracity of the scenarios. Rather than dialog with an author or creator, respondents largely perceived themselves as getting lost in the story, and encountering it directly. This perceptual dissociation of source from content renders questions of source credibility seemingly to the level of an afterthought. Indeed, for many respondents such considerations were never even thought of at all.

#### **4.2 Emotional Salience, Telepresence, and Credibility**

Appel and Richter’s (2010) “mediated moderation model” of narrative persuasion contends that credibility is mediated by transportation, and transportation is moderated by the emotional engagement (“need for affect”/NFA) of a given viewer. The concept of emotional salience arising from this study seems particularly harmonious with Appel and Richter’s model. Respondents discussed credibility as an outgrowth of emotional salience, with the subthemes of emotional salience reflective of concepts described by telepresence theory (identification as a form of parasocial interaction) and the NFA construct (resonance as an impetus to engage the emotions in the narrative).

##### **4.2.1 Identification and Telepresence as Parasocial Interaction**

The rich descriptions of respondents’ experiences of identification with characters appears strongly bound up with the parasocial interaction dimension of presence. This

implies a relationship of some kind between the two concepts; however, nothing in the results suggests if identification is an antecedent to presence, or *vice-versa*.

The definitions of parasocial interaction offered in existing presence literature (Hall, Wilson, Wiesner, & Cho, 2007; ISPR, 2000; Tian & Hoffner, 2007) are general in nature, referring to individuals imagining “interacting” with characters. Given this, it is noteworthy how specific the relationships were between the respondents and their favorite characters; the fictional characters became mentors, friends, role models, and even idealized first-person experiences of the self.

#### **4.2.1.1 Identification as Distinct from Emotional Resonance**

While empathy with character has been observed as an aspect of identification (although not a necessary condition of it), identification is more associated with the characteristics or point-of-view of one or a few specific characters (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009). Specifically, it has been quantitatively associated with degrees of “liking” certain characters (usually protagonists) over others (Tian & Hoffner, 2007). Emotional resonance, however, applies to the authenticity of emotion displayed by all characters, not only those with whom one identifies, resulting in an “atmosphere” that is perceived as credible. An example of this distinction is Iago, the antagonist of William Shakespeare’s “Othello.” Iago’s emotional modeling of jealousy, spite, and nihilism is authentic and realistic; it resonates. However, Iago is also a murderous, manipulative, and racist villain. Following Reinhard’s 2005 conceptualization of identification based on similarity of psychological and/or values-based traits between viewer and character, it emerges that Iago is emotionally resonant even as one (hopefully!) fails to identify with him either directly or “wishfully .”

Even if one were to identify with Iago as being similar to oneself in terms of general traits and values, that similarity remains conceptually distinct from the specific displays of emotion that emerge in response to plot points as the narrative progresses. Rather, emotional resonance serves as a goodness-of-fit check for emotional responses of all characters to the events of the story, irrespective of the viewer or reader's degree of identification with those characters.

#### **4.2.2 Resonance, Credibility, and Telepresence as Transportation**

This-goodness-of-fit check served by emotional resonance is perhaps its strongest link to perceived credibility. Respondents frequently spoke of the “attitudes” of characters toward the events of plot either resulting in their being “drawn in” to the narrative (when the characters’ emotions fit the situation) or having their experiences of the story “break” when those attitudes did not seem appropriate to real life. This language of being “drawn in,” or having the experience of a “break” in response to resonance (or the lack thereof) is very similar to the vocabulary used to describe the transportation dimension of telepresence (Bilandzic & Busselle, 2008; Green & Brock, 2005; Hall & Bracken, 2008). Whether resonance is a vehicle for transportation or an outgrowth of it, it does seem to be the case among the respondents that the maintenance of resonance could coincide with the maintenance of transportation, and that the loss of resonance could coincide with a breakdown in transportation. As transportation is the dimension of telepresence most often mentioned in concert with persuasion and credibility (Green and Brock, 2000; Hall, 2006; Hall and Bracken, 2008) the possibility exists that resonance plays a to-be-determined role in the general persuasiveness of narratives.

#### **4.3 Impressions of Authors based on Narrative Content Alone**

While investigating what respondents actively perceived about narrative sources based on narrative content alone constituted a major thrust of this study, it ultimately presented itself as a major limitation; it was the case among the respondents that they thought almost nothing about the creators of stories, including their favorite stories. While this result was congruent with the structural linguistics perspective on the “authorless” nature of stories, it left little to discuss with participants in context with grounded theory research. Since they did not think much (if anything) about sources when they were not being interrupted by them, very few details presented themselves in an emergent fashion. The respondents had to be specifically probed about their experiences, which constitutes a break in grounded theory method.

#### **4.3.1 The “Illusion of Non-Mediation” and the Invisible Mediator**

It did seem to be the case that the participants felt themselves in dialogue with characters (through parasocial interactions), rather than in dialogue with the storytellers who created those characters. Mary directly described vivid impressions of characters, not of authors. From Barthes’ structural linguist framework, this could be interpreted as the viewer/reader interacting with the Text as *sui generis*. Polichak and Gerring (2002) cite the example of a viewer rooting for a boxer to “get up and fight!” while viewing a movie with such content. This conversation is explicitly between the receiver and the Text; it is dialog with narrative (rather than with author). Put another way, viewers cheer for “Rocky” to keep fighting, rather than for Sylvester Stallone (the author of the film’s screenplay) to keep writing. Polichak and Gerring further speculate that such conversations could serve the purpose of aiding in cognitive processing, comprehension,



and retention of narratives (2002, p. 73); however, they explicitly do not direct one to greater engagement with narrative sources.

This phenomenon of direct engagement with the Text returns us to the definition of telepresence as the “perceptual illusion of non-mediation” (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). It seems that in the case of narratives, the mediator—the storyteller—fades behind the same shroud as the media channel itself. The negative emotions described by respondents when the storyteller was perceived points back at this illusion of non-mediation and non-mediator. It suggests that the most palatable narrative source is no source at all.

#### **4.4 Conclusion**

This thesis began with the observation that the diverse set of media effects theories (from cultivation through priming and framing, to entertainment education) seldom seem to incorporate a functional role for those professionals who create the media in question. However, this inquiry into what people typically think about the sources of media based on content alone would seem to justify the omission of authors from the theoretical models of media effects. Based on the interviews described herein, it is certainly clear that the classical model of source credibility described by Perloff (2008) does not apply to messages presented as narratives. The study participants seemed to rarely consider narrative sources; when they did, such thoughts were regarded as an unwelcome interruption. Rather, it is the emotional salience of the material, as demonstrated by the affective responses of its characters and how well they can be identified with, that sets the standard of credibility in an otherwise “authorless” (Barthes, 1977) environment.

##### **4.4.1 Directions for Future Investigation**

Formal characteristic of media (aka presentation variables) have been associated with increases in perceptions of credibility (Iding, Crosby, Auernheimer, & Klemm, 2008; Jensen, Coe, & Tewksbury, 2006), and increased experiences of presence (Bracken, 2006; Green, Garst, Brock, & Chung, 2006). Narrative structure is one such formal feature as well (Neuendorf & Lieberman, 2010), and may integrate closely (if not identically) with the transportation dimension of telepresence (Sanders-Jackson, 2009). However, each interview participant in this study stressed the importance of actors' performances as the critical formal feature of media. Empirical research including measures of participants' impressions of acting quality may be conducted using similar methods as these previous studies. Such experiments may reveal interactions among acting quality and other formal features of narratives which were only actively perceived when they interrupted the respondents' experiences; much of flimcraft is geared to bolstering the impact of actors' performances through judicious edits, sound effects, and camera movements, and this may factor into their association with credibility in existing research. While the interviews suggested almost no (positively valenced) awareness of these formal features, their impacts have been empirically established by the researchers named above.

Again and again, the interview respondents emphasized emotions—emotional salience appears to be the principle component in the credibility of narratives as reported by them. If so, the role of emotion may be underestimated in contemporary telepresence scholarship. This suggests there may be a use for an operationalized/scalar form of emotional salience in future research.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Qualitative Discussion/Interview Script

#### *What are some of your favorite television shows?*

PROBES: Tell me a story about how a show became your favorite. Did you like it right away or did it grow on you?

#### *What about stories makes them believable to you?*

PROBES: How important is realism to you in stories? How much like real life are the stories you enjoy?

#### *What about stories makes them unbelievable to you?*

PROBES: What may make you reject or laugh at what you are seeing? What makes you think of a story as fake?

#### *What is it about your favorite stories that makes you connect with them?*

PROBES: Tell me a story about how your favorite shows have made you feel. Is feeling an emotion important to your enjoyment?

#### *Do you pay much attention to the production quality of TV shows and films?*

PROBES: Are you more likely to pay closer attention to shows that look polished, or does it not affect you? Do your friends feel the same? How well made are the shows you normally watch?

#### *Do you get a sense of what the authors of your favorite stories are like personally just from watching the shows?*

PROBES: Do you feel like the author is speaking to you, or just like you're experiencing the story directly? If you can, please describe what the author of your favorite story is like based on what he/she has written or directed.

***Why do you think the creator of your favorite shows made them?***

PROBES: Do you feel aware of the show's writers or directors? Does thinking about them matter to you or affect your enjoyment? Do you ever think about their motives or inspirations?

***This study is looking into what we think about the creators of stories just from the stories themselves.***

PROBES: What do you think you can know about the creators of stories just from the stories themselves? How confident are you in your answer?

APPENDIX B  
Short-Form Demographic Intake

Demographic Information

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Year:      First Year    Sophomore    Junior    Senior    Grad

Major: \_\_\_\_\_



## APPENDIX C

### Informed Consent Document

**Title:** Source Deflection: Questions Regarding the Active Perception of a Narrative Message's Source.

**Investigator:** William Weaver, School of Communication, CSU (216) 513-2507;  
Dr. Cheryl Bracken, School of Communication, CSU (216) 687-4512

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Dear Potential Subject:

You are being asked to participate in a study being done in the School of Communication at Cleveland State University by Graduate Student William Weaver, under the direction of Dr. Cheryl Bracken. If you have any questions you may contact Dr. Bracken in the School MU 223, 687-4512, [c.bracken@csuohio.edu](mailto:c.bracken@csuohio.edu) or Mr. Weaver at 216-513-2507, [williamjamesweaver@hotmail.com](mailto:williamjamesweaver@hotmail.com).

In this study you will be interviewed by a researcher about your use of story-based media. The interview will last 30-60 minutes. It will be an unstructured conversation.

You will not be asked to provide any information that would identify you as an individual. All information you provide during the interview is confidential. Your information along with all the other information from other participants will be combined prior to any presentation or publication, and only trends in the data. Your information is being used only for research purposes, and only the trends in the data will be reported.

There are no risks beyond those of daily living to your participation, nor are there specific benefits to you from your participation. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may refuse to answer any question or terminate the questionnaire prior to completion. You may withdraw at any time without penalty.

If you'd prefer, you may contact Dr. Bracken, Mr. Weaver, or the Institutional Review board prior to filling out this questionnaire. Once you have read and agree to participate, please sign, date, and return this sheet to the person running this study.

*If I have questions about your rights as a research subject you can contact the Cleveland State University Institutional Review Board at (216) 687-3630.*

Thank you for your time and effort.

-----  
Sincerely,

William Weaver  
Communication Graduate Student  
216-513-2507  
Communication  
[williamjamesweaver@hotmail.com](mailto:williamjamesweaver@hotmail.com)

Cheryl C. Bracken, PhD  
Associate Professor  
School of

MU 223, 687-4512  
[c.bracken@csuohio.edu](mailto:c.bracken@csuohio.edu)

Please Print your Name \_\_\_\_\_

Please Sign and Date \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### Participant Demographics

(Please note, participants were asked to self-identify their ethnicity rather than choose from options in a list; their answers are offered in quotes.)

“Frank” is a 23-year-old “white” senior, majoring in Communication; “John” is a 24-year-old “white” senior, majoring in Criminology; “Mary” is a 25-year-old “white” junior, majoring in Communication; “Andy” is a 20-year-old “black” sophomore, majoring in Political Science; “Mark” is a 25-year-old “Middle Eastern” senior, majoring in General Communication; “Nancy” is a 21-year-old “Pacific islander/white” junior, majoring in Communication; “Jane” is a 22-year-old “white” senior, majoring in psychology; “Jeff” is a 24-year-old “black” senior, majoring in liberal studies; “Tess” is a 23-year-old “white” senior, majoring in Media Studies.

## APPENDIX E

### Individual Respondent Summaries

The interviews are presented in chronological order. Each respondent has been assigned an alias to preserve his/her anonymity.

#### **Frank**

“Frank” is a 23-year-old senior majoring in communication. He indicated that his favorite channel for stories is video games, particularly “role playing games” where the player guides a main character through the events of an elaborate epic (he cited titles including the “Mass Effect” and “Final Fantasy” series). Frank indicated deep investment in these stories, saying “they have stayed with me for all these years.” Despite his intense passion, he was unable to name the creator of “Mass Effect;” however he was able to identify (by name) the producer of the “Final Fantasy” series. In both cases, he indicated positive feelings toward the publishers of these software titles, almost ascribing the authorship of the stories to the companies that market them.

When asked about his connection to the stories and what makes them believable (or credible), Frank indicated that the emotional realism and “relate-ability” of the characters was profound, despite the plotlines being fantastical or science-fiction inspired (“The typical saving-the-world type thing,” according to him). Frank would be the first to use the word “relate-ability;” it would become a hallmark observation of the respondents.

When asked what would make a story unbelievable, Frank again cited emotional responses of characters, indicating that “unnatural” actions and reactions were particularly problematic. He elaborated that poor voice acting was the critical factor in making a story element unbelievable, saying that “wooden” performances or failure to

“use filler-words” or “over enunciation” of dialog were most likely to make him reject the content proper. He also cited typos and grammatical errors in written text as having a similar effect.

He did not feel that special effect quality, high-definition presentation, or digital 3-D made him any more likely to connect with a film or television show. He felt that the majority of the content he enjoys displays high production values, but he did not consider himself actively aware of such presentation features. When queried about what does make him likely to connect with a story, he replied, “It definitely has to connect with me emotionally somehow.” He then returned the conversation to “Mass Effect,” describing a moment where the player must select a supporting character to be sacrificed in order for the player to advance in the story. Frank became outwardly anxious (wringing his hands and hunching his back and shoulders) as he described ordering his selected character to his demise, adding “I hated myself for it, but I definitely wanted to know what happened next.” He was asked to explore this further:

Weaver (researcher): *Keep up with that... tell me how these [game elements] make you feel.*

Frank: *...he was a good character, a good soldier. He was loyal and you hated yourself for letting him go, if just for a little bit.*

Weaver: *It's interesting talking about an emotional connection with him. When you play the game are you playing as yourself or as a character? Are you basing choices on your own conscience or are you getting into the role of somebody who may or may not be like you?*

Frank: *On my own conscience. I've tried time and again, but I can never with a clear conscience use a renegade option or a bad guy option.*

When quizzed, he indicated that this deep emotional investment was central to his enjoyment of the material. When asked about feeling a sense of the author, Frank almost became defensive:

Weaver: *With these [stories], not just the average ones, but the ones that matter to you, do you feel like the author is speaking to you directly, or are you just encountering the story?*

Frank: *[Pause.] Um... I get the feeling it's more just encountering a story, but I hesitate to call it that... that just seems kinda shallow to me, and the stuff I like, it's definitely not shallow in any way.*

Following the prewritten interview script, Frank was asked to describe the author of his favorite story, based only on the contents of that story. He replied in detail, saying, "I imagine he is open minded... has a free spirit. Has a slight problem with authority, but not completely. He likes people a lot, he holds his friends very dear... but was possibly alone for most of his life, or at least felt that way." When asked if that description applied to himself, Frank agreed that it did.

Ultimately, thinking about the creators of content or their motives or inspirations did not impact Frank's perception of that content, although he stated that he made purchasing decisions based on the publishers of software titles. He felt that a "slight glimpse" into the personality features of authors was possible, but nothing specific enough to impact credibility.

## **John**

“John” is a 24-year-old senior majoring in criminology. He described his favorite stories as comedies that display longevity and that “can make me laugh each time I return to it” (His favorites include “Caddyshack,” “Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” and “The Princess Bride.”). He stated that plot lines that “are a stretch” *vis-a-vi* realism are most likely to be rejected by him as unbelievable (he cited action movies in particular), whereas comedies are less subject to scrutiny since they make fewer efforts to “sell themselves” as credible portrayals of reality. Returning to “The Princess Bride,” he said, “Obviously it’s not real, and it’s not trying to be real, and I enjoy that. So it’s not important.” He stressed that overt efforts to appear believable resulted in a loss of authenticity; they made him aware of the creators as attempting to convince him of realism, and that awareness negatively impacted his ability to enjoy the material. “But if they’re not trying to sell me on it and I can get into it,” said John, “then I just love it.”

John also cited “the attitude of the characters” toward the circumstances of the plot as necessary to prevent him from rejecting a story outright. This was a new revelation for him (he mentioned never thinking about these questions before), causing him to muse, “I never realized I looked at it that way, the characters, how they act, how they perceive... yeah. Yeah, that’s pretty big.” When mentioned against presentation factors (HD, widescreen, etc.), John said “I don’t think that really matters,” stressing performance once again as a critical formal presentation feature. However, he felt that his friends found high-definition more important than he did.

Asking about the average production quality of his favorite shows, John responded that they were not particularly well made. He then went on to name FX’s

“Sons of Anarchy” and AMC’s “Breaking Bad” as two of his favorites; both happen to be multi-award winning shows with some of the highest production values on television.

When this was pointed out to him, John acknowledged their high formal quality and observed, “I guess that when I see it all in one big picture I don’t really pay attention to anything... I just get hooked up in the story, and that’s all that matters.”

When asked to describe the creator of his favorite story, John offered up the writer of “The Princess Bride,” whom he did not know by name. He described this person as having “a vast knowledge, being very knowledgeable,” as well as having a “good sense of humor.” He also felt that description fit him personally. When asked why he felt the author wrote that story, John stated, “They were passionate about it, or had the idea for a long time, but I know there are some creators out there that... know it will bring them a profit.”

### **Mary**

“Mary” is a 25-year-old communication major in her junior year. She revealed a broad palate of story tastes including fantasy novels, primetime soaps (“Desperate Housewives”), and a broad range of “reality shows” (“Teenage Mom,” “The Bad Girls Club,” and “The Bachelor”). She felt that the topics of the reality shows display a world of authentic problems that she could “personally relate to,” whereas fantasy novels present a more exciting and uplifting world.

Mary’s preference for reality TV was unique among the sample, and she was asked to describe it further. She reiterated that the scenarios reference her life; one show even verged on becoming part of her life:



“I got hooked on each series, but whatever. I mean, ‘The Bad Girls Club’ is a terrible reality show, but the drama and the chaos and everything is just so ridiculous to watch that they grew on me immediately. The fighting, the name calling, the throwing drinks in their faces. But it’s real! I mean I’ve seen it in real life, I’ve been there, I’ve done that. [laughs]. Another reality show I watch is ‘The Bachelor,’ which was all cute and nice at the beginning. I guess I have a personal tie to it since my brother got me interviewed for the show, which was really embarrassing at first. Once I was supposed to be on the one show, then I had to watch it to see who the bachelor was and who all the catty bitches were... [It was] this most recent season with Brad. So, I had [swallows]... I had to see what could have been!”

Mary then described coming to care about the characters on reality shows, even though she felt some of the scenarios (such as the bachelor and his brother and father discussing their feelings on camera) left her somewhat incredulous. When asked if she could tell if a program was a reality show without being told that it was, she replied, “Probably not,” and acknowledged that the characters onscreen were no different than if they were depicted by actors.

However, Mary insisted that the emotional risks taken by the participants on “The Bachelor” were authentic, and that authenticity was not dulled by the constructed nature of the program, or the unrealistic dates where the participants got to become acquainted (she mentioned an evening at an abandoned carnival and an African wildlife tour as two

examples). “The feelings are real,” said Mary, and they are what makes the show believable.

Mary felt that little could be known about the producers of television shows from only the content, but she did feel that the authors of books were “putting themselves out there” and much could be inferred about them including family life, upbringing, circles of friendships, and social desirability. She drew this distinction, saying, “Every writer wants a piece of themselves in their book,” but such considerations were made only after a story has been read. While reading, Mary reported vivid impressions of characters, not of authors.

### **Jane**

“Jane” is a psychology major in her senior year; she is 22-years-old. She identified her favorite story as “The Celestine Prophecy,” a tale of a man who engages in a spiritual journey while he pursues manuscripts from around the world.

Jane felt that the content of the story was particularly “relate-able” to her experience because the events in the book appeared to mirror the events of her own life as she read each chapter. She felt that what she was bringing personally to the book (her own mental/spiritual/psychological orientations) gave the material a strong credibility.

When asked what makes the story believable, Jane answered, “You can create the story in your mind. Rather than reading things on a piece of paper, you can experience the things the character is experiencing.” She was then asked how this vivid story made her feel; “Amazing,” she said. She also stated that she was unable to read any material from which she could not experience enjoyment.

Weaver: *What would you say that enjoyment is based on? What is the minimum condition for that enjoyment to start?*

Jane: *Being able to relate to it. That makes me feel kind of like a oneness. It helps you relate, and it makes me happy.*

Switching to the topic of production/presentation features, Jane stated that she has found herself more likely to watch material presented in HD rather than standard definition, and she feels the average quality level of the media she views is comparatively high-end.

When asked if she got a sense of authors speaking to her directly versus encountering the text, Jane replied after a long moment of thought:

Jane: *I guess... it would be more of not the author speaking directly to me, but kind of more of an outside thing telling me I should have read this because obviously it pertains to my life, so...*

Weaver: *Interesting... sort of an outside voice? Can you go into any detail? That's fascinating to me.*

Jane: *Well just the way I was reading that book ["The Celestine Prophecy"], he goes through those manuscripts... it seemed like everything that I read, right after I read it, it would happen. Or even as I was reading that section! I put the book down... I stopped reading it for like a week or something. I picked it back up, and as soon as I picked it back up whatever I read, that happened! So it was like I was meant to stop reading it for that week. So it seemed like something outside, I don't know if you want to call it God or whatever, but something outside was acting on me reading this book and getting the certain message I needed to get out of it. I guess I could see that happening*

*with just TV shows or whatever. You can get a message out of it that you probably needed to hear. Not specifically from the maker of the book or the show, but something you just needed.*

When asked why she thought the author wrote that book, she replied, “So I could read it.” She laughed, following with, “He probably wanted to spread a good message around.” However, the former answer seemed to be offered with greater conviction than the latter.

### **Andy**

“Andy” is a 20-year-old sophomore studying political science. He prefers to view content via Netflix streaming, and he identified “Dexter,” “House,” and “That 70’s Show” as his top three favorites. He felt that they became his favorites over time (rather than upon first viewing), and that going back to early episodes “sort of draws you in” (He used that phrase repeatedly over the course of his interview.). He felt the common theme among this material was humor.

Andy felt the medical information offered on “House” (a hospital show) was very specific and believable, including the show’s depiction of illnesses and treatment. When asked what makes a show unbelievable, Andy mentioned unlikely plot twists and story elements.

*Weaver: It sounds like you’re talking more about the nuts-and-bolts of the plot, rather than acting or scenery...*

*Andy: No, acting has a lot to do with it. You can’t have bad actors. I feel like it’s about the plot, but it’s also how setting the atmosphere draws a certain person in, or draws me in.*

Weaver: *That's a word nobody has used in these interviews yet: "atmosphere."*

*What do you think the pieces are that create atmosphere?*

Andy: *The actors, of course.*

Andy felt that stories connect with him when characters have deep back stories that aid in understanding their motivations (he cited "Dexter" as an example), and he felt that he was more likely to pay attention to material that was presented in HD or that featured greater production quality.

Andy felt that much could be known about the creators of narratives based only on story content; specifically, he felt the more "relatable" a story was, the more one could infer about its author because it would be easier to "imagine yourself in that position."

### **Mark**

"Mark" is a 25-year-old senior majoring in communication. His favorite stories include staples of British literature (such as the works of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens) and modern fare such as the "Twilight" series. When asked if there was a common theme, Mark quickly replied, "romance."

Of the sample, Mark's story preferences were unique in that he was able to experience them as books, movies, and television versions. He noted a recent film version of "Pride and Prejudice" was satisfying in that it was very close to his imagination while reading the book. He also felt a connection to "Eat, Pray, Love," saying "I imagined Julia Roberts doing the movie before it was even picked up to be made as a movie."

Mark felt these stories were believable insofar as they were reflections of his own life. The presence of fantasy elements in material such as "Twilight" did not prevent him from claiming the story was like his life as well. "We make up, we break up," said Mark

in reference to “Twilight,” “Its stuff we do every day.” He went on to cite acting performance as the most important aspect of a film’s believability, in excess of even the film’s plotline and technical merits. This time, his example was “Titanic:” “The movie was huge, everybody loved it,” said Mark, “but I hate Leonardo DiCaprio.”

Weaver: *It seems that with movies, everyone is telling me that it’s the performance, it’s the acting, it’s what they convey.*

Mark: *Yeah.*

Weaver: *I was expecting to hear, “I want to see HD, I want to see...”*

Mark: *I mean, I tried IMAX, I tried the 3D... they’re nice, cool, maybe for a young person’s imagination. But they’re not something I’m interested in.*

On the opposite token, Mark felt that bad acting was the most likely feature to make a story unbelievable. He felt that he could selectively ignore bad writing (such as heavy-handed plot points or predictable scenarios), but bad acting was impossible to overlook. When asked why he could overlook heavy handed writing, Mark observed, “Deep inside, males or females, we’re trying to have a fairytale. We’re trying to live a fairytale.”

When asked if he could get a sense of an author’s personal attributes from story content, Mark brought up Charles Dickens:

“Whenever I imagine him, I imagine him with a long goatee.... And connected eyebrows. Maybe because he wrote ‘David Copperfield,’ that’s why. Short. Was a geek, nobody liked him... bad taste in clothes.”

Asked if he felt that description could apply to himself, Mark emphatically replied, “No. No, no.”

Asked directly what could be known about the creators of stories through the stories themselves, Mark stated that we could learn something akin to “a strong first-impression;” there was enough content for intuition to function, but nothing that could be fact-checked or verified.

### **Nancy**

“Nancy” is 21-years-old, and a junior majoring in communication. Initially, she seemed hesitant during the interview, saying “I don’t even know any stories,” upon being asked what her favorites were. However, she soon mentioned “trying to read” “Gossip Girl” and “Harry Potter,” but was unable to finish them. She instead moved on to the filmed versions. “Things I usually read are like magazines, they’re shorter,” said Nancy. “I’d rather, like, watch a show because it’s easier. I can do homework and multitask while it’s on.”

Nancy felt that believability and realism was connected to the feelings of characters, rather than the depictions of the world. She specifically mentioned “Law & Order: SVU” and “CSI” as material that she considered among her favorites that did not accurately represent the world. “Obviously, it’s not that realistic,” she said. “After watching ‘SVU’ you’d think there was a sexual predator around every corner.” However, she did feel that the depictions of relationships between the characters were realistic, even among TV police who shield each other’s corruption from exposure.

When asked what would make her refuse a story as unbelievable, Nancy replied that detecting moralistic messages (on topics such as drug use) sparked her instant rejection “when I’m aware of what they’re actually wanting me to think.” She felt that these messages were manipulative.

Conversely, she felt more drawn into stories where she could make emotional connections with characters.

Nancy: *The reason I like “[Law & Order] SVU” so much is this character Detective Benson, who is like this lady cop. I really connected with her because I felt she made women more empowering. She showed she could be the typical stereotype as a woman, but at the same time she’s like borderline lesbian... very man-ish qualities, but there’s nothing wrong with that. She’s just being a powerful woman.*

Weaver: *Who is the actor?*

Nancy: *Oh, I don’t know. I just know her name is Detective Benson...*

Weaver: *Well, you feel what towards this character?*

Nancy: *It’s like they say, that they feel like they almost know the person personally. Obviously, I don’t know the actress, but you feel like you know the character, know what she is gonna do.*

Asked to describe the creator of “Law & Order”/the creator of Detective Benson (television producer Dick Wolf), Nancy saw him as a “very structured person, probably a very boring person. I can see him being like one of those old guys that’s never been married and will never be married.” She further observed that she could perceive him most keenly when the show offered “more liberal” political content that ran counter to her own values. She stated that her awareness of unwelcome political ideology was something she could filter out of her engagement with the program and its characters.

### **Jeff**

“Jeff” is a senior in the liberal studies program; he is 24-years-old. He listed among his favorite stories “X-Men (the filmed version, rather than the comic),” “True



Blood,” and “The Great Debaters.” He remarked that these stories were thematically linked in that they were about “overcoming adversity” and “standing up for the race.” He also observed that these themes were universal, and that they allowed him to have discussions with people “who may not be like me at all.” He felt that the fantasy elements in the vampire serial “True Blood” actually made the content more emotionally believable by offering a point of contrast: “You see different groups of people coming together and understanding their differences, and dealing with those differences, dealing with those demons” he said. “You see the humanity in a show like ‘True Blood’ which is about all those non-human aspects of life.” He was probed further:

Weaver: *...you have a heavy dose of fantasy elements. Where is it grounded? What do you grab onto? What hooks you in?*

Jeff: *Probably, like, emotion. Emotion is a very human thing. It goes against reason and logic. Emotion, most of the time, doesn't make sense on the surface. But it is the one characteristic that does make us human, and you can relate to it no matter how much fantasy is involved.*

Jeff identified himself as an artist and musician; he stated that being a practitioner of the arts himself made him very aware of the technical merits of TV shows and films, and that he expected high quality at all times, and he became distracted and irritated by the features of “under-produced” material. Foremost, he said, “I want to see quality acting.” Specifically, he wanted, “a wow factor. I want to see passion... They didn’t just put out a mediocre mess they thought would appeal to the masses, they took time, they did something, they thought about it...”

This conversational thread ran deeper:

Weaver: *How aware are you of the hand of the artist at work when you, uh, when you watch a story? Do you find yourself visualizing the creators making it, or do you just glide along with the story?*

Jeff: *It depends. Most of the time I just glide along with the story. I hate to know endings, I don't wanna know too many details... if it's good, I just enjoy it.*

Jeff felt viewers could not get an idea of what creators are like just from watching a TV show, but that enjoying a series could lead one to learn about its creators afterward, and that new information could increase one's enjoyment of the show. He used the example of the show "Grey's Anatomy;" his enjoyment of the show inspired him to research the biography of its creator. Knowing about her then made the themes in the show more apparent to him.

When asked what could be known about the creators of stories based on the story content alone, Jeff took the question in a slightly different direction. He stated that an artist has a right to be totally unknown and private, leaving the material to stand alone. However, should that artist feel compelled to insert a point-of-view about ethical or social issues, it was her/his prerogative (and sometimes obligation) to do so. "You can know what they want you to know," said Jeff.

### **Tess**

Finally, "Tess" is a 23-year-old senior majoring in media studies. She identified her favorite story as "Willie Wonka"/"Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," and mentioned that she collected all the books and filmed versions associated with the tale. She also enjoyed the filmed versions of "Alice in Wonderland" and the TV sitcom "Friends." She described each as directly "relatable" to her in some way, citing the close

relationships in “Friends,” the longing in the first act of “Wonka,” and her physical resemblance to “Alice in Wonderland’s” titular character as a child. “She had long hair, I had long hair. That could be me in the forest,” said Tess. She also felt that the relationships depicted on “Friends” were representative of her own reliance on roommates since having left her parents’ home.

When asked what would make a story unbelievable, she returned to a moment in “Wonka” that disappointed her:

Tess: ... *that part at the end where the elevator shoots out, I just hate that part.*

Weaver: *Why?*

Tess: *It made it just, like, cheezy. It’s trying to go overboard with imagination, and I feel like that’s just extremely not realistic. It’s like, why couldn’t they just have taken a car to Charlie’s house? I guess crashing through a roof is more fun. I don’t know...*

Weaver: *No, no, let’s go with this. I mean, we’ve got all kind of magical punishments happening to these kids throughout. So what is it about that moment that loses you as opposed to Mike TeeVee getting teleported in a million little pieces?*

Tess: [Laughs]

Weaver: *The Violet blueberry is my favorite.*

Tess: *umm... I don’t know.* [Pauses]

Weaver: *Because those have something that the elevator doesn’t have?*

Tess: *The elevator is just corny. I guess the other stuff like the blueberry is just as corny, but it makes the story, how the kids are all taken off one-by one...*

Weaver: *It [the elevator scene] took you out of the story?*

Tess: *Yeah!*

Tess frequently used the word “relatable” to describe what makes a story believable, and she was asked to describe what that means to her. She replied:

“Seeing the relationships between you and the character, so you can picture yourself as her or him. So you can live out your fantasies, I guess. I remember when I was little I watched ‘Little Mermaid’ and in it she brushes her hair out with a fork. So, I’m like “Oh, I have long hair,” and I tried it. It doesn’t work very well. But it’s little things like that. Living under the sea because I have long hair, like her.”

She elaborated that relate-ability was about being able to see oneself as the character, sharing that character’s relationships with other characters as if they were one’s own.

Tess went on to cite an awareness of bad editing and continuity problems due to her media classes causing similar breaks as the elevator moment in “Wonka.” She stated that questions of production quality only came up in instances where there were errors or poor attention to detail. However she did not seek out higher quality material by intention. “I would just unconsciously go to that [high quality presentations],” she said. “It’s only the bad things that would get my attention.”

When asked if she felt like an author or creator was speaking to her, or if she was just encountering the story itself, she responded that she absorbed the story directly. “When I read books, I always think of me as the person in it. I don’t ever really think about the author or director, or whatever,” she said. Asked to describe the author of “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory” (Roald Dahl) based solely on the story, she said,

“Someone quirky. [Pause] I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about him.” She went on to offer that thinking about the creators does not influence her ability to enjoy it, nor does it influence her perception of the story and its contents.