"We are all Gossip Girl": *Gossip Girl* **and the Promise of Interactive Television**

Elisa Lange

In November 2010, Current TV, a cable network founded by former Vice President Al Gore, has started airing a 30 minute TV series called *Bar Karma*, which is created in online collaboration with fans and is thus a new step to truly participatory and interactive TV. On a website users can pitch storylines, comment on submitted entries, talk to the producers, and contribute marketing ideas. The show is co-produced by *SimCity* creator Will Wright and features well-known actors like William Sanderson (http://current.com/studios/about/). Of course, there is no guarantee that the fans' story idea will find its way into the actual show since the producers and writers still hold the power to decide how and if a pitch is worked into the final product. Still, this project allows viewer to have more than an imaginary control over the televised narrative even if the project's success still remains to be seen.

Still, interactivity rarely plays out on the primary level of the TV program itself, but more commonly on the secondary level and tertiary level of the televisual text, that is network created websites that allow some contributions from fans and unregulated communications between fans (Fiske, 1983: 85). Interactivity within the TV landscape is often associated with the viewers' ability to turn from passive consumers into active producers of content that "adds" to the televised narrative but does not change it (Hassapopoulou, 2010: 48). This distinction usually does not to take into account that even when viewers are passively sitting on their couch watching soap operas, their minds are still actively engaged in making sense of the narratives and relationships. Nonetheless, recent views of audience interactivity have been tied to "new communication technologies" (Kiousis, 2002: 356) and the development of "transmedia storytelling," defined by Jenkins (2006: 96) as content "unfolding across multiple media platforms". This correlation between new media and interactivity on the secondary and tertiary level of televisual texts has been examined in several studies, for example, Mark Andrejevic's (2008) article on the fan forums on Televisionwithoupity.com, Perryman's (2008) analysis of transmedia storytelling on *Dr Who,* or Will Brooker's (2004) essay on *Dawson's Creek*. However, the consensus is for the most part that the promise of interactive TV and shared narrative control is often only "imaginative" (Jones, 2004: 167), which Marina Hassapopoulou has exemplified in her analysis of the *Heroes* fandom. She argues that although fans are given more opportunities to participate beyond the televised narrative, these activities usually do not extend beyond the digital extensions of a show and "parameters established by producers and network executives" (Hassapopoulou 2010: 48). Hence, viewers are encouraged not only to consume the show but also to produce additional content in order to create a loyal and stable fanbase. Consequently, a primary television text can rarely be altered but is usually enhanced by the communicative aspects of new media venues like Internet forums, YouTube, fanfiction webpages, Twitter, comment sections or blogs, often

referred to as added "new value" (Jenkins, 2008: 9) or "enhanced content" (Caldwell, 2002: 257).

For this reason Matheson (2005: 158) argues that "if some digital media reveal new textual dynamics, it is not because they are newly interactive, but because they enable interactivity or connectivity in distinctive and particularly rich ways". Similarly, Kelli Fuery (2009: 43-45) suggests, that "we have to stop thinking of interactivity as a process in which we participate and perform" but look at it in terms of "experience and practice". Thus, the promise of interactive television in *Gossip Girl* should be understood in terms of experiencing communicative exchange between the fans, the producers, and the TV network, made possible by new media. This communicative exchange enables the viewers to contribute to the narrative database of the primary text, that is – gossip. As the show is structured around the use and abuse of new media, the unseen character of Gossip Girl, and the unapologetic disclosure of its market-oriented production and "hypermediacy" (Bolter, 2000: 62), it mirrors today's prevalent mediated communication and addresses the fans on a meta-level. Thus, *Gossip Girl* on the one hand encourages critical engagement with the consumption of new media and the show itself; on the other hand, it exemplifies the tension between the simulation and the actuality of interpersonal communication and shared power within interactive media.

Gossip Girl and "Hypermediacy"

*Gossip Girl'*s initial online popularity stemmed mostly from it being loosely based on the already popular novels of the same title by Cecily von Ziegesar and it being produced by Josh Schwartz, who had already created *The O.C.*, another successful teen drama. *Gossip Girl* premiered on the small network The CW in the fall of 2007, half a year after the cancellation of *The O.C,* which had aired on FOX. The series starts with former bad girl and socialite Serena van der Woodsen returning from boarding school to the Upper East Side after her brother Eric has attempted suicide. It is later revealed that she left New York abruptly after sleeping with her best friend's boyfriend, Nate Archibald. During Serena's absence, her best friend (and sometimes enemy) Blair Waldorf has taken over Serena's crown as the schools reigning "queen bee" and is none too happy about Serena's reappearance. The show is also populated by the Humphrey family and their family friend Vanessa Abrams, who live in Brooklyn and thus equal the *Gossip Girl* definition of "poor," as well as Chuck Bass, who is the show's resident bad boy and hedonist billionaire. Of course, as every fan knows, over the course of four seasons the web of relationships and storylines has grown too complex to explain in a few sentences. However, at its core the show always revolves around the lives of wealthy New Yorker teenagers, which is filled with scandal, a warped sense of morality and documented by the omnipresent but never seen narrator/blogger Gossip Girl, who feeds of the anonymous tips, photos, and videos people send in. The show's premise can best be summed up by its poignant tagline "You are nobody until you are talked about" and highlights the blurring lines between public and private live that we face in today's mediated

society. Although *Gossip Girl* has never been a ratings success, it permeates the Internet like no other current show, drawing up more Google Search hits than, for example, *Grey's Anatomy* or *Glee* (Google Search, 2010). Thus, *Gossip Girl* still provides a poignant insight into today's surveillance economy, celebrity culture and zeitgeist.

As stated, social and information networks like Facebook and Twitter play an integral part for viewers in creating connectivity and added value. Thus, sociologist Vincent Miller (2008: 394) argues that social media leads to an increasingly "phatic" culture. According to his article, "phatic" messages "are not intended to carry information or substance for the receiver, but instead … maintain and strengthen existing relationships in order to facilitate further communication". This development is often linked to the rise of a "postsocial" society that is defined by a flattening of social relations and increasing communication with others through objects, e.g., mobile phones (Knorr-Cetina, 1997: 1-2). *Gossip Girl* harvests this development by emphasizing "phatic" and mediated communication as a focal point of its primary narrative, using it on the secondary level for advertisement and for encouraging buzz on the tertiary level. Since the show is explicitly permeated by new media inside and outside of the primary narrative, it can be called a "hypermediated" show that "makes us aware of the medium or media … (in sometimes subtle and sometimes obvious ways)" (Bolter, 2002: 34) and "seeks the real by multiplying mediation so as to create a feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience" (Bolter, 2002: 53). On the show's primary narrative level we are confronted with the ambiguous identity of Gossip Girl, which constantly reminds us of our own voyeurism. Furthermore, the viewer is faced with an array of intertextual literary and pop culture references, the conspicuous use of new technology and social media for interpersonal communication, or barely veiled product placement for the Microsoft search engine Bing, Vitamin Water, or designer fashion labels. Beyond the show's primary level the narrative is extended to the official *Gossip Girl* blog (which is part of The CW's official homepage, mobi-sodes, various Twitter accounts of producers, actors and even characters, and of course the real-life gossip industry, which the actors and fans are a part of.

The constant "hypermediacy" and self-reflexivity on *Gossip Girl* enables the "users [and viewers] to perceive the experience [of interactivity] to be a simulation of interpersonal communication" (Kiousis, 2002: 379) and enables viewers to question the walls between reality and fiction as attentive consumers and media critics. For this reason, Jacob Clifton, a writer who recaps the *Gossip Girl* episodes for Televisionwithoutpity.com has pointed out in his reviews that the "whole show is a wink to us viewers" (Clifton, 2010: 16) . Thus, it often toes the line of consisting of nothing more than meta-commentary: the show's narrative references other media like Internet forums or celebrity blogs that publish gossip, which in turn informs fan forum discussions, review articles and more gossip, which in turn serves as new fodder for *Gossip Girl*'s narrative database. Another dimension to this self-referential cycle is added by the celebrity status of the show's actors, who are prime targets for online gossip columns, paparazzi, and fan scrutiny. Thus, the

show allows the viewers to contribute actively to the narrative database of the show - gossip and surveillance culture. Hence, *Gossip Girl* not only mirrors today's surveillance culture and economy but also tries to reveal the modes of television production to the viewers. Josh Ellis argues that "popular understanding of how TV is produced is necessary if viewers are to know the status of what they are being shown, not so that they can go out and make TV themselves" (Ellis, 2004: 275). Although recent projects like *Bar Karma* show that the concept of interactive television is still expandable, television's self-reflexivity still "fails to deliver on the promised transformative shift in power relations" (Andrejevic, 2008:44). However, the *Gossip Girl*'s constant self-aware portrayal of itself, surveillance, and media aims to disrupt the viewers' "invisible, silent third-party" voyeurism (Abelmann, 1998: 97) by making them "aware of television as television, as a signifying apparatus" (Butler, 2010: 118), thereby trying to break the fourth wall.

The ambiguity of Gossip Girl

On *Gossip Girl*, an important element for breaking the fourth wall between audience and the fictive world of the show is the unclear identity of the Gossip Girl persona itself. Gossip Girl has to be understood on two different levels. On one level, Gossip Girl is an omniscient narrator that recounts the frame narrative to the viewers. Every episode begins and ends with a Gossip Girl commentary. At the episode opening Gossip Girl often greets the viewers directly, e.g., "Good Morning, Upper East Siders", while the end is signified by "XOXO, Gossip Girl". Although Gossip Girl often uses the restrictive label "Upper East Siders" to classify the audience, the viewers are openly acknowledged as active participants and partners in the Gossip Girl's voyeurism. By referring to specific events the Gossip Girl narrator also establishes an imaginary "common … space and time" (Wilson, 1993: 139), which both audience and narrator occupy for the duration of the episode. For example, in the Thanksgiving episode of the second season, Gossip Girl starts the episode by saying, "For the rest of the country, Thanksgiving is when families come together to give thanks, but on the Upper East Side the holiday thankfully returns to its roots – lying, manipulation and betrayal" (Safran, 2008). Here, the show makes use of "familiar direct address" to "position their viewers as recipients of the spoken discourse of the conversation" (Wilson, 1993: 150-51). Thus, Gossip Girl's narration ensures the viewers' complicity in watching Gossip Girl watch the characters of the show and reminding them throughout the episode of their participation in voyeurism. The snarky, disembodied voice-over narration of Gossip Girl throughout the episodes creates a Gossip Girl persona that is all-knowing in the universe of the show, shares the knowledge of the viewers and thus creates communicative coherence. This shared knowledge often encompasses allusions to events that are known to the audience but not to the characters or the Gossip Girl persona on the character level, thereby creating dramatic irony and an atmosphere of "indiscreet discretion" (Bergmann, 1987: 39) between the viewers and the narrator. For instance, the Gossip Girl frame narrator already comments on Chuck and Blair's secret affair in the seventh episode of season one "Seventeen Candles"; however, the Gossip Girl on the character level first learns of that information after a tip from Chuck in episode thirteen of the same season "The Thin Line Between Chuck and Nate". On the character level, Gossip Girl appears within the story as digital messages displayed on the characters' phones

or computers, mostly read out loud by the Gossip Girl narrator. These gossip messages are always based on secret tips, photos, and videos being send to Gossip Girl. Thus, Gossip Girl as a character possesses only a limited knowledge. Still, Gossip Girl never actively creates rumors herself but only acts as a distributor of gossip, crossing the boundaries between private and public knowledge.

The dichotomy between Gossip Girl as omniscient narrator and Gossip Girl as a character, whose knowledge is restricted to the tips send to her, is an interesting plot device that draws the audience attention to the fourth wall and allows the viewer to "to seek out the limits of the simulation" (Johnson, 2005: 45). Drawing the curtain back that far exposes the extra-textual level of television, where Gossip Girl is indeed just a narrative device created by the writers and given voice to by the actress Kristen Bell (whose name does not appear in the credits). Still, it is perhaps fruitful to view Gossip Girl's ambiguousness concerning the relationship towards the main characters, gender, identity, and knowledge in relation to trickster figures. Tricksters are often morally ambiguous but exhibit mediative, community-creating functions; they are akin to transgressing boundaries of every kind; they break and uphold social rules at the same time (Fritsch, 2004: 36-37). Esther Fritsch (2004: 36) has equaled gossip itself to the features usually exhibited by trickster figures in African-American and Native-American literature. Consequently, on *Gossip Girl*, both gossip and the dichotomous Gossip Girl persona display trickster-like features and functions. For instance, Gossip Girl's gender, despite having a female narrator's voice, is never certain. In the episode "The Goodbye Gossip Girl", Eric's boyfriend Jonathan is accused of being the infamous blogger. Thereby, the viewers are encouraged to question the seemingly set gender of Gossip Girl as well as the supposedly female gaze in order to realize that "because … [most] presences online are textual they are also self-evidently performances, and therefore one can be liberated from the concept of authenticity itself" (Slater, 2004: 601). Furthermore, Gossip Girl, as a character, occasionally likes to help Blair and Serena because "she prefers to be the only one screwing with [them]" (Lasher, 2010). In the third episode of season four "The Undergraduates", Gossip Girl streams a video on her website as a favor to Blair and Serena. Later in the season, Blair asks Gossip Girl (via e-mail) directly for help in finding someone for her. Gossip Girl obliges because Blair and Serena "are her people" (Lasher & Savage, 2010). Here, the show emphasizes the community-building function of Gossip Girl but also illustrates that Gossip Girl's relationship with the main characters is indeterminable and never safe. Since Gossip Girl is both the narrator and a character within the series, she/ he signifies the embodiment of transgression by blurring and questioning the socially created boundaries between private and public life.

Gossip, community, and shared control

Gossip is, of course, not only a "discreet indiscretion," as sociologist Jörg Bergmann (1987: 39)

has called it, used to expose hypocrisy. Gossip can also be understood as a community-building discursive strategy**.** In the context of *Gossip Girl*, gossip builds a communicative "bridge" (Skains, 2010: 104) that serves as a common text to connect, not only the characters within the show, but also the producers, the viewers, and the network. Whether gossip plays out within the narrative of the show, as meta-references to reality, as Twitter conversation among fans and producers, or as critical responses to story arcs or ad campaign, "the specific content of gossip is often less important than the social ties created … between participants" (Jenkins; 2006: 84). A similar view is voiced by Gossip Girl in the episode "The Gooodbye Gossip Girl". Gossip Girl expresses the hope that the main characters' experience with scandalous gossip and surveillance "will bond them forever" (Safran, 2009). Just how much gossip and Gossip Girl serve as community-building tool for the show became apparent in season three when most of the characters started college and the high school group dissolved. In high school the protagonists had often been tied together by Gossip Girl blasts; they provided coherence and a common communicative ground. However, the blasts became noticeable scarce in season three and thus, the storylines and relationships felt disjointed and fragmented. In the fourth season the show returned to include Gossip Girl as an active agent, driving the plot forward and connecting the characters. Additionally, new features for the Gossip Girl blog were introduced, for example, live stream videos or polls. These features were partly extended to the "real" Gossip Girl blog on the The CW website, thus expanding the televised narrative of voyeurism into the viewers' reality (http://gossipgirl-blog.cwtv.com). For example, in the second episode of the fourth season, "Double Identity," it is mentioned by Blair that Gossip Girl has set up a poll between Dan and Nate, which could then be found on the "real" Gossip Girl blog to vote and comment on.

The live stream features introduced in season four are certainly a visual quotation of real celebrity gossip websites like TMZ.com. Indeed, Stephanie Savage said in an interview before the start of season four that the revamping of the fictional Gossip Girl website as a "TMZ-style live feed" was necessary to give the show a more contemporary look since it had "fallen a little behind the times in terms of what these websites can actually do" (Rochelle, 2010: 6). Over the years, as the characters have matured and the actors have become more famous, the show has grown to reference and include yellow press and celebrity blogs in its story lines. Thus, the show seeks to draw parallels between itself and the real gossip industry and, consequently, to extend the narrative beyond the televised text as meta-commentary. In the third season, the popular actress Olivia Burke (played by teen star Hillary Duff of Lizzy McGuire fame) starts studying at NYU and falls in love with Dan Humphrey. Her popularity is mostly owed to her starring role in the vampire movie trilogy *Endless Knights*, which is a jab at the *Twilight* movies. Due to her fame, her relationship with Dan becomes the target of celebrity blog PerezHilton.com in the episode "How to Succeed in Bassness". Hence, the show not only comments on the gossip-fueled celebrity industry but also quotes real-life gossip, i.e., young actresses visiting college, for example, Emma Watson studying at Brown University. Writer and co-executive producer Joshua Safran acknowledged in an interview that the writers occasionally "rip" celebrity news

from headlines for *Gossip Girl* plots (Gruben, 2009b). At the same time the show dramatizes its own paradox of "beautiful young people living in New York, playing beautiful young people living in New York on TV" (Gay, 2009: 43). Josh Schwartz even admitted that "where the show ends and reality begins can be very blurry" (Gay, 2009: 43) as the actors have become a stable fixture in today's gossip pages and the New York sets are usually swarmed by paparazzi and fans armed with cell phone cameras. Thus, the viewers continually add to narrative database of the show by talking and gossiping about the show and its actors, which the producers and writers can recycle for new storylines.

Furthermore, Twitter accounts of showrunner Josh Schwartz, episode director Norman Buckley, various actors, the network and fictional characters from the show (Blair Waldorf's maid Dorota regularly updates and answers messages during the TV season) help to create social ties through "phatic" communication and gossip. Twitter helps to build a community around the show and it is a useful tool for recognizing fans' voices. As Josh Schwartz is also the executive producer of the spy-show *Chuck* (NBC), which features heavily in his Twitter messages, he often has to assure *Gossip Girl* fans that he appreciates them and the show just as much. For example, on March 18, 2010, he responded to a concerned *Gossip Girl* fan with "Love all children equally. It's just Gossip [Girl] is already renewed for S4", and on August 4, 2010, he wrote, "I love Gossip Girl. We have more chuck [sic] casting news right now. Read nothing more into these tweets". Craig Engler (2010), the general manager and senior vice president of the TV channel Syfy Digital, wrote just recently on a blog post for *Mashable.com* that Twitter (and other social networks) can be of great value in the TV business for clearing up rumors, gaining instant feedback, showing respect and appreciation to the viewers and give the them the feeling that someone is listening. For example, on August 12, 2010, Josh Schwartz denied the rumor that Blake Lively was leaving *Gossip Girl* via his Twitter account because it "seemed to upset a lot of [people]".

Still, Twitter also opens up venues for direct harassment that many TV producers and writers have to learn to deal with without resorting to an eye-for-an-eye attitude. This dilemma often implies "creating an online persona" (Lacob, 2010) that can straddle the gap between publicity and privacy. Nevertheless, social media "expands the dynamic between author, text, and reader by offering a space for metafictional discourse" (Skains, 2010: 96) that has barely existed before. Whether Josh Schwartz has insults hurled at him via twitter because fans are disappointed with story lines, whether viewers congratulate him on a good episode, or whether fans share cooking recipes with maid Dorota or her real-life counterpart Zuzanna Szadkowski, Twitter creates the simulation of interpersonal communication by narrowing the perceived distance between the audience and the people behind the fourth wall. However, the tension between the viewer's desire for shared creative power, which has been multiplied due to new media's enhancement of connectivity, and the actuality of author- or producer-centered narratives on TV is the Achilles heel of every TV show. Linda Holmes (2010) wrote a poignant online article about the "entitled

fanbase" and the problem of ownership of a televised narrative. She argues that "television plots are not supposed to be determined by majority vote" (para.1), thereby bluntly debunking the idea of interactive television and shared control. She concedes that fans should talk about what they want and what does not work; yet, they cannot always get what they desire since TV shows are "the creation of its creators" (para. 16). Thus, fans need to be able to come to terms with their "relative powerlessness" in order to enjoy the show (Holmes, 2010: para. 14). Mark Andrejevic (2008: 40) voices a similar opinion in his study about fan communication on the popular Televisionwithoutpity.com forums. He states that the "fate of the savvy viewer [is] to search for the redeeming value of the media not in the content – over which their newly enhanced, interactive participation has little influence – but in understanding why their participation *must* be ineffective, in their insider knowledge of how the system works". Thus, fans who criticize their favorite show on forums or blogs, who discuss flaws in acting or directing, who write fanfiction to rework the televised narrative, or who create parody videos are able to "identify with the position of the producer" (Andrejevic, 2008: 34) and can advance their critical abilities. However, they cannot control the televised narrative itself. Several new media critics, for example Henry Jenkins (2006) or Victor Costello (2007), view this form of engagement as an empowerment of the audience. Yet, it can only be understood in this way if viewers are aware of their "relative powerlessness" regarding the televised narrative. Otherwise, viewers perceive unwanted storylines as personal betrayal and slight, which also occurred on *Gossip Girl* at the end of the third season.

In the season's final episode "Last Tango, Then Paris", Jenny Humphrey, a teenage wannabe fashion designer gone rogue, loses her virginity to her stepbrother and bad boy Chuck Bass. This plot development caused outrage among the fans, not only because Chuck Bass had tried to force himself on Jenny in the pilot episode and is one half of the most popular romantic pairing on the show, but more importantly because executive producer Stephanie Savage had denied the possibility of a Jenny/Chuck liaison in an interview with E!Online two months earlier, "I want to leave [that rumor] alone. It's like when people said that Eric [Serena's younger brother] was Gossip Girl. Saying "What? Are you crazy? Eric's not Gossip Girl!" is somehow giving credence to it" (Dos Santos, 2010a). It is hard to judge if Savage deliberately misled the fans or was just trying to avoid answering the question to make the finale more shocking; however, many viewers felt they were lied to for the sake of one of the show's now infamous "Oh My God (OMG)" moments and thus lost their trust in the producers. Many fan reactions echoed the anger that one commenter on E! Online voiced: "They [the showrunners] denied chuck and jenny sex straight to fans and they [the fans] got screwed over by believing them [sic]" (E!Online; 2010). On Twitter one fan (Headband Project) wrote to Josh Schwartz on June 22, 2010, "The worst part was blatantly lying to the fans", referring to Savage's interview in March. On May 16, 2010, Josh Schwartz reacted to the complaints by writing on Twitter, "Gossip Girl fans. Love the passion." Thus, the producers' aim to create buzz and gossip via the storylines, interviews, and new media cannels clashed with the audience's perception of interpersonal communication as something they can trust and believe in.

In an interview given after the finale, Schwartz and Savage defended their creative choices by saying, "That's the show. We were launched on the "OMFG" ad campaign; we gotta live up to that" (Dos Santo, 2010b). This statement caused fans to question whether "OMFG" moments were more important to the writers than character development and, consequently, has developed into a negatively connotated expression in fandom . This subversion of the "OMG" theme allows fans to reject the network's and producer's call for consumption. Schwartz and Savage's explanation reveals that the network is another important element in the complex web of communication surrounding the show. The "OMFG" campaign was launched by The CW at the end of the writer's strike in April 2008 to promote new episodes of *Gossip Girl*; so the show was not necessarily "launched" on this campaign, as Savage claims, but "re-launched" after assessing its potential. The provocative campaign featured two posters with racy, sexual scenes from the show titled with either "OMG" or the more controversial "OMFG." However, the meaning of the "F-word" is entirely implied and never spelled out, thus playing with society's preconceptions. The campaign was created, according to a The CW statement, "to remind viewers of some of the 'OMG' moments that have made *Gossip Girl* one of the most buzzed-about new shows on television … and speaks directly to our adult 18-34 viewers using expressions that are part of their lexicon" (Hibberd, 2008). What is interesting here is that The CW glosses over the fact a considerable part of *Gossip Girl*'s audience falls into the teenage 12-17 demographics (Fitzgerald, 2007). This explicit targeting of the 18-34 demographics allows the network by default to create more adult-themed ads (Moore, 2009). Furthermore, the network acknowledges that the ad campaign re-appropriated a popular Internet acronym to strengthen *Gossip Girl*'s status as a buzz-worthy show. In turn, *Gossip Girl* became The CW's flagship show for its rebranding as a network with "TV to talk about" and "OMG TV," launched in 2009. Thus, The CW cleverly used *Gossip Girl*'s online success to position itself as a network for the new media generation and to justify the lack of traditional TV viewers. Additionally, by emphasizing the "buzz" surrounding the show instead of the viewer numbers, the network reiterates the show's core theme and encourages the viewers to gossip about the show in order to create cultural relevance and presence. Thus, the "OMG" theme has been used repeatedly for TV ads, promoting new episodes. In the third season it was changed to "OM3" to hype an upcoming threesome in the episode "They Shoot Humphreys, Don't They". In the fourth season the acronym was translated into the French version "OMD" (Oh Mon Dieu) in lieu of the first episodes taking place in Paris. On a more comical and self-ironic note, the "OMG" theme appears in a season two episode that includes Chuck visiting former bad girl Georgina Sparks in a Christian camp, where she has to wear a t-shirt that reads "OMJC" (Oh My Jesus Christ) (Gerstein, 2009). Hence, the "OMG" motif functions as a shared text that viewers, producers, writers, and the network can draw on as a communicative bridge, even if it has been appropriated in different ways by each party over the course of the series.

Gossip Girl and consumption

Based on Caldwell's (2002: 265) assessment of new media, the hyping of "OMFG" moments can be read as the dependency of modern consumer culture "on a successfully manufactured 'new'", which can be traced back to the ideas of Fordism. Caldwell (2002: 265) also argues that "electronic media and advertising survive only by scanning the horizon for semiotic uneven-ness … and appropriate it as their own", which is the "basis for successful marketing in the modern era". On *Gossip Girl*, the search for next big scandalous moment, i.e., "semiotic uneven-ness," best exemplified by the inclusion of the "F-word" in a nationwide campaign, has been deeply embedded into the show's primary and secondary level texts in order to create gossip and consumption on the audience level. Yet, in contrast to other television shows, *Gossip Girl* is rather unapologetic and conspicuous about the entanglement of economic interests and television production, highlighted by Stephanie Savage's claim that "on *Gossip Girl*, every episode is a sweeps episode" (Gruben, 2009a). Like a commercial, the style of *Gossip Girl* is not "invisible" but draws the "viewers' interest to the product" (Butler, 2010: 134). In this case "the product" being the show itself as well as the countless brands referenced within the show's narrative. These references include foremost the constant visual display of designer clothes and designers, which are not always named explicitly. However, since fashion is one of the biggest draws of the shows, as recently stated by the *LA Times* (Magsaysay, 2010), viewers are encouraged to take actions in the real world to find the product they are looking for on the Internet, for example, by scouring the The CW website or *Gossip Girl* fashion blogs (http://www. gossipgirlfashion.net/). The official The CW *Gossip Girl* blog, for instance, includes a link to "See what the fashionistas of the UES are wearing", which leads the users to an online shop where they can buy designer clothes as seen on the show. On November 18, 2010, The CW posted a message on its Twitter account saying, "How did new girl Juliet snag her style on Gossip Girl? Find out more on www.renttherunway.com/gossip". Thus, the network redirects the viewers' fashion interest to its advertisement partners, inducing them to consume by including a discount code within the Twitter message. This expansion of the TV text is referred to as "merchandising augmentation" by Caldwell (2002: 260) and includes everything "that extends the show's text into the fans' very real space". Furthermore, product placement is often unsubtly included into the characters' dialogues. For instance, in the episode "The Unblairable Lightness of Being" the Microsoft search engine Bing is so poorly woven into the dialogue that the advertisement becomes jarringly obvious for the viewers. In the relevant scene, the fashion designer Eleanor Waldorf tells a wedding planner to "bing" (Leitenberg, 2010) suitable wedding locations and thus appropriates the term "to google" for a lesser known search engine. This conspicuousness of advertisement is of course necessary to create product cognizance on the side of the viewer, but it also deliberately enhances the viewers' awareness "of television as television" (Butler, 2010: 118) and that "consumption and display" is not only the "raison d'etre of the Gossip Girl characters" (Pattee, 2006: 168) but also of the show itself. Thus, the show forces the viewers "to seek out the limits of the simulation, the points at which the illusion of reality breaks down, and you can sense that's all just a bunch of algorithms [or in this case: writers, producers, network, advertisers] behind the curtain" (Johnson, 2005: 45).

Gossip Girl and the fourth wall

The show's narrative often deliberately points to the fourth wall with what Johnson (2005: 75) calls "flashing errors," i.e., a "narrative signpost". In the episode "The Goodbye Gossip Girl," Serena unsuccessfully tries to unveil the true identity of Gossip Girl. However, at the end of the episode, Gossip Girl sends out a message saying, "You wanted to meet Gossip Girl, well look around, you just did. I'm nothing without you" (Safran, 2009). The show directly tells the audience how to interpret the narrative, namely, that, as Stephanie Savage likes to say, "we are all Gossip Girl" (Warner, 2008). A similar but more subtle portrayal of the show's core theme can be found in the episode "The Age of Dissonance" (Queller, 2009). In the episode, the characters are performing Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence* as a play. Each character is playing a part that in some way reflects a current dilemma in his or her life. For example, Blair, who has just been rejected by her dream college Yale, can now empathize with the desolateness of Countess Olenska's life. Therefore, the characters are basically performing their own lives on stage for a critical audience, additionally being filmed backstage by Vanessa for a documentary and constantly being confronted with exposing Gossip Girl blasts. In the second act of the play the characters suddenly step out of their roles after Nate yells directly at the theater audience, "You want feelings. Well, I hate these clothes. I hate this play". However, The audience, represented by New York Times' theater critic Charles Isherwood, is delighted by the reinterpretation of Wharton's "repressed characters, melding with the actual kids aggressively expressing their feelings". Thus, the show makes itself the punch line of a meta-joke and thereby addresses the TV viewers behind "the curtain", exaggerated even more by the inclusion of meta-commentary on fan gossip. For example, Vanessa admits that she is "annoying", thereby voicing verbatim fans' complaints about her . The show here literally dramatizes itself on a meta-level – recognizing its indebtedness to classic literature, its relationship with the audience and the elusiveness of private and public self in a surveillance society.

In the *Gossip Girl*-verse, where reputation and social image mean everything, the show often revolves often around how the perception of our self relies on the perception of others (Solove, 2007: 31), how we are both the watchers and the watched. Hence, the shaming quality of Internet gossip is often used to enforce social norms and social justice, as recently demonstrated by the release of secret US diplomatic cables by Wikileaks. One user on Gawker.com (2010) even asked sardonically, "So Julian Assange is Gossip Girl?". This type of surveillance might reveal hypocrisy, but it also creates an atmosphere of rigid social control that echoes Foucault's theory of panopiticism (Solove, 2007: 65). The link between power and surveillance and the blurry line between personal and public self is an important aspect of *Gossip Girl* since public shaming via the Gossip Girl blog is often responsible for gaining or losing social power. Gossip Girl, of course, often represents the ever watchful eyes of today's surveillance society or "voyeur nation" (Calvert, 2000) and induces the protagonists to create a impenetrable public self. However, as public and private self are just different aspects of the same person, *Gossip Girl* likes to illustrate that the

disclosure of private secrets never brings us closer to the "true" person. It only humiliates people by "displaying [them] out of the context in which others may know them" (Solove, 2007: 69). In the 'Age of Dissonance', the carefully crafted "performance" of the characters stops when Nate directly acknowledges the audience in the theater. He thus breaks the fourth wall and "reminds the audience that they are watching a play" (Fuery, 2009: 55). For a moment the characters are able to be themselves, thereby risking the disapproval of society. However, this struggle between private and public self holds up a mirror to the TV viewers in order to encourage them to assess their own mediated life more critically.

Conclusion

Gossip Girl often exemplifies what Kelli Fuery (2009: 141) has described as "the post-panopticism of new media in which we are so aware of being watched that part of our strategy of transgression is to incorporate the very acts of surveillance". The characters on *Gossip Girl* might be subject to the watchful eyes of cell phone cameras and gossipmongers, but they also know how to use surveillance to turn society's voyeurism onto other targets. The underlying implication is that to break the hold of a mediated panoptic gaze, we have to become "surveillants" ourselves or at least have to become aware of our own position in today's surveillance culture. The rise of new media technology, social networks, smart phones, and other devices has made it incredibly easy to circulate information. However, the awareness of the possible damage that public accessible information can have for one's own or other's reputation is still lacking. *Gossip Girl* continually tries to break the fourth wall by directing the audience's awareness towards point where fiction and reality intersect. The point where they realizes that they contribute to the gossip fueling the show's narrative by partaking in surveillance, the point where they start to question television and new technology as media that aims at consumption of products and "phatic" communication in order to create loyal viewership. Still, *Gossip Girl*, much like its narrating and blogging counterpart, is an ambiguous construct. It seeks to sell itself and consumer products to stay on the air but at the same time aspires to prevent its audience from being cultural dupes.

However, in a show that deals so extensively with new media as *Gossip Girl*, the long-term effects of online shaming are too rarely portrayed to leave an impact on the audience. Especially in the light of the outcry caused by the suicide of 18-year old Tyler Clementi in September 2010 after his roommate had streamed a live feed of him having sex with another male (Foderaro, 2010). Ironically, many online news reports featured a picture of the roommate, thereby publicly tying his name and face forever to the incident and denying him rehabilitation. Since *Gossip Girl* actually featured a similar storyline in season one, which was resolved when the homosexual character Eric orchestrated his own coming out via Gossip Girl in the episode "All About My Brother", the show could explore the serious repercussions of Internet gossip in greater depth instead of just using it as plot tool or meta-joke.

Works Cited

Andrejevic, M. (2008): Watching television without pity: The productivity of online fans. *Television & New Media*. [Online]. 9 (1), p.24-46. Available from: http://tvn.sagepub.com/cgi/content/ abstract/9/1/24. [Accessed: 22 Jun 2010].

Abelman, R. (1998): *Reaching a critical mass: A critical analysis of television entertainment*. New York: Routledge.

Bergmann, J. (1987): *Klatsch – Zur Sozialform der diskreten Indiskretion*. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Bolter, J.D. (2000): Remediation and the desire for immediacy. *Convergence: The international journal of research into new media technologies.* [Online]. 6 (1), p.62-70. Available from: http://con.sagepub.com/content/6/1/62. [Accessed: 6 Oct 2010].

Bolter, J.D. (2002): *Remediation: Understanding new media*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Brooker, W. (2004): Living on *Dawson's Creek*. Teen viewers, cultural convergence, and television overflow. In: Allen, R.C. & Hill, A. (eds). *The television studies reader*. London: Routledge. p.569-580.

Butler, J. (2010): *Television Style.* New York: Routledge.

Caldwell, J. (2002): New media/old augmentations: Television, the Internet, and interactivity. In: Jerslev, A. (ed). *Realism and 'reality' in film and media.* Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press. p.253-274.

Calvert, C. (2000). *Voyeur nation: Media, privacy, and peering in modern culture*. Boulder: Westview Press.

Clifton, J. (2010): Pieces of Jennifer's body (Recap of the episode 'The Undergraduates'). *Televisionwithoutpity.com*. [Online]. Available from: http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/

show/gossip_girl/_the_undergraduates_a.php?page=16. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010]

Costello, V. (2007): Cultural outlaws: An examination of audience activity and online television fandom. *Television & New Media*. [Online]. 8 (2), p.124-143. Available from: http://tvn. sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/8/2/124. [Accessed: 22 Jun 2010].

Dos santos, K. (2010a): *Gossip Girl boss promises a "great," "emotional" story for Chuck and Blair*. [Online]. Available from: http://www.eonline.com/uberblog/

watch_with_kristin/b169496_Gossip_Girl_Boss_Promises_a_quotGreatquot_ quotEmotionalquot_Story_for_Chuck_and_Blair.html.[Accessed: 19 Nov 2010].

Dos Santos, K. (2010b): *Is ***** really dead?! Gossip Girl bosses tell all about shocking finale*. [Online]. Available from:

http://www.eonline.com/uberblog/b181642_Is_____i_Really__i__Dead____i_ Gossip_Girl__i__Bosses_Tell_All_About_Shocking_Finale.html. [Accessed: 19 Nov 2010].

Ellis, J. (2004): Television production. In: Allen, R.C. & Hill, A. (eds). *The television studies reader.* London: Routledge. p.275-292.

Engler, C. (2010): *10 reasons every TV exec needs to start tweeting.* [Online]. Available from: http://mashable.com/2010/11/05/tv-executives-twitter/. [Accessed: 5 Nov 2010].

E! ONLINE (2010): May 18. Comment. [Online]. Available from: http://www.eonline.com/ uberblog/b181642_Is_____i_Really__i__Dead____i_Gossip_Girl__i__Bosses_Tell_ All_About_Shocking_Finale.html. [Accessed: 19 Nov 2010].

Fiske, J. (1983). *Television culture.* New York: Routledge.

Fitzgerald, T. (2007): *With teens at least, 'Gossip Girl' is hot: It's the top-rated new show among 12-17-year-old.* [Online]. Available from: http://www.medialifemagazine.com/artman2/ publish/Younger_viewers_49/With_teens_at_least_Gossip_Girl_is_hot.asp. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Foderaro, L.W. (2010): Private moment made public, then fatal jump. *The New York Times.* [Online]. 29th September. Available from: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/30/nyregion/30suicide. html. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Fritsch, E. (2004): *Reading gossip. Funktionen von Klatsch in Romanen ethnischer amerikanischer Autorinnen.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag.

Gawker.com (2010) November 28. Comment. [Online]. Available from: http://gawker. com/5700580/. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Gay, J. (2009): The nasty thrill of 'Gossip Girl'. *Rolling Stone.* 2nd April. p.42-47.

Gerstein, L. (Writer), & Norris, P. (Director). (2009): Southern gentlemen prefer blondes (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl.* New York: Silvercup Studios.

Google Search. (2010): Google Search 'Grey's Anatomy', 'Glee', 'Gossip Girl'. [Online]. Available from: www.google.com. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Gruben, A. (2009a): *3 part series: 'Gossip Girl' co-executive producer Josh Safran on kisses and disses in season 3.* [Online]. Available from: http://www.examiner.com/pop-media-in- los-angeles/3-part-series-gossip-girl-co-executive-producer-josh-safran-on-kisses-and- disses-season-3. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Gruben, A. (2009b): *Interview part 3: 'Gossip Girl' co-exec prod, Josh Safran, on funerals, a love child & Henry the cat.* [Online]. Available from: http://www.examiner.com/pop-media-

in-los-angeles/interview-part-3-gossip-girl-co-exec-prod-josh-safran-on-funerals-a-love-child-henry-the-cat. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Hassapopoulou, M. (2010): Spoiling *Heroes*, enhancing our viewing pleasure: NBC's *Heroes* and the re-shaping of the televisual landscape. In: Urbanski, H. (ed). *Writing and the digital generation*. Jefferson: McFarland. p.45-57.

Hibberd, J. (2008): *CW hopes sex sells 'Gossip'.* [Online]. Available from: http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1041826120080411. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Holmes, L. (2010): The double-edged sword of devotion: 'Chuck' vs. the entitled fanbase. [Online]. Available from: http://www.npr.org/blogs/monkeysee/2010/02/the_doubleedged_sword_of_devot.html. [Accessed: 7 Oct 2010].

Jenkins, H. (2006): *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide.* New York: New York University Press.

Jenkins, H. & Deuze, M. (2008): Editorial: Convergence culture. *Convergence: The international journal of research into new media technologies* [Online]. 14 (1), p.5-12. Available from: http://con.sagepub.com/content/14/1/5. [Accessed: 6 Oct 2010].

Jones, S. (2004): Web wars: resistance, online fandom and studio censorship. In: Janovich, M. & Lyons, J. (eds). *Quality popular television. Cult TV, the industry and fans*. London: BFI Publishing. p.163-180.

Kiousis, S. (2002): Interactivity. A concept explication. *New Media & Society* [Online]. 4 (3), p.355-383. Available from: http://nms.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/4/3/355. [Accessed: 22 June 2010].

Knorr-Cetina, K. (1997): Sociality With Objects. *Theory, Culture & Society* [Online]. 14 (4), p.1-30. Available from: http://tcs.sagepub.com/content/14/4/1. [Accessed: 9 Nov 2010].

Lacob, J. (2010): *Twitter's TV wars.* [Online]. Available from: http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-11-29/hart-hanson-dan-harmon-and-shonda-rhimes-discuss-twitter/full/. [Accessed: 30 Nov 2010].

Lasher, A. (Writer), & Buckley, N. (Director). (2010): The undergraduates (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl*. New York: Silvercup Studios.

Lasher, A. & Savage, S. (Writers), & Lazarov, J. (Director). (2010): The townie (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl*. New York: Silvercup Studios.

Leitenberg, J. (Writer), & Cooke-Leonard, J. (Director). (2010): The unblairable lightness of being (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl*. New York: Silvercup Studios.

Magsaysay, M. (2010): The hottest thing on 'Gossip Girl'? The clothes. *Los Angeles Times*.

[Online] 14th November. Available from: http://www.latimes.com/features/image/la-ig-gossipgirls-20101114,0,5274014.story. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Matheson, D. (2005): *Media discourses: Analyzing media texts*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Miller, V. (2008): New media, networking and phatic culture. *Convergence: The international journal of research into new media technologies.* [Online]. 14 (4), p.387-400. Available from: http://con.sagepub.com/content/14/4/387. [Accessed: 6 Oct 2010].

Moore, F. (2009): *'Gossip Girl' threesome prompts Parents Television Council Campaign against show*. [Online]. Available from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/11/04/gossip-girl-threesome-pro_n_346054.html. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Pattee, A. (2006): Commodities in literature, literature as commodity: A close look at the Gossip Girl series. *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*. 31 (4), p.154-175.

Perryman, N. (2008): *Doctor Who* and the convergence of media: A case study in 'Transmedia Storytelling'. *Convergence: The international journal of research into new media technologies.* [Online]. 14 (1), p.21-39. Available from: http://con.sagepub.com/

content/14/1/21. [Accessed: 6 Oct 2010].

Queller, J. (Writer), & Buckley, N. (Director). (2009): The age of dissonance (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl*. New York: Silvercup Studios.

Queller, J. (Writer), & Lazarov, J. (Director). (2010): War at the Roses (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl*. New York: Silvercup Studios.

Rochelle, T. (2010): Exclusive interview: GG producer Stephanie Savage offers up big season 4 scoop. [Online]. Available from: http://www.wetpaint.com/gossip-girl/articles/exclusive-interview-gg-producer-stephanie-savage-offers-up-big-season-4-scoop#6. [Accessed: 14 Sep 2010].

Safran, J. (Writer), & De Segonzac, J. (Director). (2008): The magnificent Archibalds (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl*. New York: Silvercup Studios.

Safran, J. (Writer), & Buckley, N. (Director). (2009): The Goodbye Gossip Girl (Television series episode). Schwartz, J. & Savage, S. (Producers), *Gossip Girl*. New York: Silvercup Studios.

Schwartz, J. (2010): *JoshSchwartz76 Twitter messages*. [Online]. Available from: http://twitter.com/#!/JoshSchwartz76. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Skains, R.L. (2010): The shifting author-reader dynamic: Online novel communities as a bridge from print to digital literature. *Convergence: The international journal of research into new media technologies.* [Online]. 16 (1), p.95-111. Available from: http://con.sagepub.com/

content/16/1/95. [Accessed: 6 Oct 2010].

Slater, D. (2004): Social relationships and identity online and offline. In: Allen, R.C. & Hill, A. (eds). *The television studies reader*. London: Routledge. p.596-614.

Solove, D.J. (2007): *The future of reputation: Gossip, rumor, and privacy on the Internet.* New Haven: Yale University Press.

The Cw. (2010): *The CW Twitter message*. [Online] 8 Nov 2010. Available from: http://twitter. com/#!/CW_network. [Accessed: 8 Nov 2010].

The Headband Project. (2010): *The Headband Project Twitter message*. [Online] 22 Jun 2010. Available from: http://twitter.com/#!/ProjectHeadband. [Accessed: 11 Dec 2010].

Walter, T. (2008). Producer says we are all 'Gossip Girl'. [online]. Available at: http://www.ctv. ca/servlet/ArticleNews/show/CTVShows/20080212/savage_gossip_080212/20080212/. [Accessed: 12 Dec 2010].

Wilson, T. (1993): *Watching television. Hermeneutics, reception and popular culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.