Nancy K. Baym

Interpreting Soap Operas and Creating Community: Inside a Computer-Mediated Fan Culture

Folklorists initially responded to the computer and related technologies with a mixture of trepidation and enthusiasm. On the one hand, technology was seen as a potentially community-fracturing force that could displace, and perhaps destroy, folkloric practice. As Dell Hymes put it, "Our present world may seem increasingly a world of technology and mongrelization of culture in which the traditional has less and less a place" (1975:353). On the other hand, technology has been seen as amenable to folklore, providing new topics and facilitating its transmission. As Alan Dundes wrote:

> Technology, especially as it impinged upon communication techniques, was thought to be a factor contributing to the demise of folklore. Not true! The technology of the telephone, radio, television, xerox machine, etc. has increased the speed of the transmission of folklore. . . . Moreover, the technology itself has become the subject of folklore. (1977:32)

A third possible impact of technology on folklore, one which has been far less explored, is that advanced communications technology, specifically interactive computer networks, can become sites for the creation of entirely new communities, each with a distinct folkloric tradition. This essay examines one such community. Rec.arts.tv.soaps ("r.a.t.s.") is a highly successful computer-mediated discussion group ("newsgroup") about American daytime television soap operas. R.a.t.s. is distributed in the form of electronic messages through the Usenet network that links universities, research institutions, governmental organizations, computer businesses and other commercial institutions, and private individuals.

Computer-mediated communities like r.a.t.s. challenge early conceptions of the folk group, which demanded, at the least, shared location and unmediated interaction. Usenet participants, in contrast, are distributed across international boundaries. Their interaction spans time asynchronously and is technologically mediated. They may never encounter one

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another face-to-face nor hear one another's voices. However, later conceptions of the folk group have insisted only that groups share "at least one common factor" and "some traditions which it calls its own" (Dundes 1965:2), or that traditions must be grounded in distinct shared rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech (Hymes 1986:54). Computer-mediated groups share the topics around which they organize, the system that links them, and the communication that passes between them. These three sets of resources are enough to create distinct ways of speaking, and hence distinctive folk groups and folkloric traditions.

This paper begins with an overview of my own relationship to the group and my methods of inquiry. In the second section, I turn to the group's technical and participatory structure, looking in particular at the ways these structures mitigate the spatio-temporal separation of group members. Third, I look at some of the emergent traditions in r.a.t.s., focusing on two sets of conventionalized ways to frame speech. Finally, I look at performance in r.a.t.s., asking by which criteria performance is evaluated.

Method

The work discussed here is part of an ongoing ethnographic study of communication in the r.a.t.s. newsgroup community. My position in the group is that of a participant at least as much as a researcher. As a long-time fan of soap operas, I was thrilled to discover this group. It was only after I had been reading daily and participating regularly for a year that I began to write about it. As the work has evolved, I have shared its progress with the group members and found them exceedingly supportive and helpful. They have acted as research participants as well as subjects and have treated me more as an ambassador than a researcher.

The data for this study was obtained from three sources. I access r.a.t.s. through an account provided by my university. In October 1991, I saved all the messages that appeared on r.a.t.s. Additional messages have been collected through January 1993. I have analyzed these messages for the multiple activities they mediate, as a source of explicit discussion about the merits of the group, and for demographic information about the senders. The second form of data is eighteen participants' responses to a set of open-ended questions I posted to r.a.t.s. These lent insight into who the users are, how and why they use r.a.t.s., what they understand the conventions to be, how they view their relationship to other participants, and how they think reading r.a.t.s. and watching the soap operas influence one another. Third, personal e-mail correspondence with ten other r.a.t.s. participants provided further perspectives and information.

I posted two notices to the group explaining the project and offering to exclude posts by those who preferred not to be involved. No one declined to

participate. All names and e-mail addresses have been changed in the examples, though the gender of the authors (when known) has been retained. In an effort to provide a feel for the appearance of the originals, excerpts from posted messages are in a mono-space font. Spelling and grammar in posts and in questionnaire responses remain as they were written.

Group structure

Usenet. In order to understand any technologically-mediated community, one has to understand the infrastructure of its system. R.a.t.s. is shaped largely by its host, the Usenet computer network, and its accompanying software, which provide both logistics and possibilities for its organization. A full description of Usenet is far beyond the scope of this paper, so I will concentrate on those aspects of the network structure that enable the creation of community. Usenet's sole function is to distribute as many as 4,500 topically organized informal discussion groups through almost 28,000 sites worldwide. It does this in part by connecting to other non-commercial networks, such as Internet and Freenets. Originally envisioned as a way for computer scientists to share programs between two sites, the system has grown to link millions of users worldwide. The topics span politics, computer programming languages, gardening, sex, and most everything in between.

The contents of each newsgroup are electronic letters called *posts* or *articles.* These are contributed by individuals from private accounts at their sites. With the exception of some site restrictions and some moderated groups, these articles can be any length and are not censored prior to distribution. Newsgroup articles are read and written through programs called *newsreaders* that keep track of which articles have already been read, allow people to edit what they will read, and allow people to reply to posted messages. When people read newsgroups, they see only the articles that have arrived at their sites since the last readings.

The number of messages passing through Usenet is enormous. In early 1993, statistics provided by newsstats, who track traffic through one of Usenet's larger networks, uunet, show that in two consecutive weeks 338,657 messages written by 76,919 people were distributed. There was a daily average of 46 megabytes of material (approximately 23,000 printed pages) (newsstats 1993). This huge discourse, unlike most written material, is fleeting. Most sites store messages for only a few days or weeks. Until a private company recently began archiving Usenet on cd-roms, few messages were stored. This ethereal quality makes messages in many ways more like talk than like writing. The conversationality of Usenet is also fostered by newsreader designs and accompanying normative conventions that invoke

social contexts for messages. These structures provide the basic resources out of which distinct cultures can be built. I will focus in particular on the role of the *quotation system* and *headers* in overcoming spatial and temporal separation and thus facilitating the creation of social context and community.

When one responds to a message in a newsgroup, most newsreaders make it easy to quote the entire earlier post. Such quoted material is marked automatically by ">"(or occasionally ":") at the start of each line and preceded with an identification of the original message's sender, e-mail address and message i.d. number. Responses can then be inserted at relevant points. Social conventions across Usenet groups dictate that one should then edit the quoted material down to the minimal length necessary to ground one's remarks in the conversational context. This ability to embed previous talk in new contributions allows people to understand responses to posts they may not have seen yet (Raymond 1991). The quotation system also allows ideas to remain attributed to their original writers. Given the potential anonymity of the system, ownership and attribution of ideas are important ways of associating the discourse with particular individuals. Context is created anew in each post that uses quotation, and messages are thus situated in ongoing streams of personalized discussion, much like face-to-face talk.

Headers appear at the top of every post. They include lines of information that identify participants, their affiliation, the time at which the message was sent, a message identification number, the identification numbers of messages to which the message responds, and, most importantly, an author-chosen subject line. The "From:" line, which identifies the sender, always includes an e-mail address and often includes the participant's name or nickname. The name can be used by readers to situate messages as coming from particular speakers, thus providing the potential for familiarity and negating the specter of anonymity. Identifying senders also allows people to go directly to or avoid messages from particular individuals. The "Subject:" line is used to indicate the topic of the post. Most responses to previous posts automatically reuse the original subject line adding "Re:" to the beginning, which enables readers to organize the posts topically. Like other header information, the subject line can also be used to select or deselect which messages to read. I will return to the subject line in more detail when I discuss traditionalization in r.a.t.s.

These computer-network infrastructure features either provide or fail to provide the communicative resources needed for cultural formation. Usenet's design allows people to identify one another and to link messages across time by rebuilding conversational context. Not all networks are equally hospitable to the processes needed to allow distinct speech communities to emerge. One reader compares r.a.t.s. to the soap opera group on Prodigy, a commercial network with far more restrictive communicative possibilities.

As she indicates, these infrastructure features have further implications for the kinds of performance each system makes possible:

> Often the [r.a.t.s.] posts turn into creative writing sessions, where the users rewrite current storylines into what they feel would be more compelling & interesting stories. The boards are also sometimes home to tangential discussions of personal interests, etc... and many friends have been made via the boards. Prodigy posters do not have the ability to include parts of previous postings in their posts & therefore it is much more difficult to carry a thread along as the sentiments of the original posts are lost in the discussion. Also, prodigy posts are often much shorter, due to the fact that reading & writing multiple pages is very slow. (personal e-mail, December 13, 1991)

R.a.t.s. is one of the oldest Usenet newsgroups. It began in 1984 when it split off from the television newsgroup (then called "net.tv"). As the few remaining original participants tell the group's history, the non-soap fans became annoyed at the excessive soap opera discussion, and the soap opera fans moved to create their own group, "net.tv.soaps." The "rec.arts" was substituted for "net" a few years later as newsgroups multiplied and the hierarchical system used to name them expanded.

Although r.a.t.s. is an atypical Usenet newsgroup in many ways, it is a particularly successful one, both in terms of having created a highly developed culture and in having attracted a huge amount of participation. R.a.t.s. ranks between 200th and 300th among Usenet groups in estimated readership, but it is one of the highest traffic newsgroups, distributing upwards of 4,000 posts each month (Reid n.d.). As another indication, it takes approximately an inch of letter-sized paper to print the messages that pass through r.a.t.s. each day. As Usenet expands so, too, does participation in r.a.t.s., and in the last three years the traffic in the group has more than doubled. R.a.t.s. was recently one of the first groups to pass the 100,000 article mark. All of this suggests that r.a.t.s. offers something that thousands of participants within range of American soap opera broadcasts find compelling, a point I will address in the section on performance below. I turn now to the participants and participant structure in r.a.t.s.

Participation. Anyone with access to Usenet and the minor expertise it requires can read the recent contributions to a newsgroup or add one's own. Groups cannot exclude anyone with access from participating: except in moderated groups, there are no group participants with the power to exclude others. However, as Ronald Rice (1989) and Elizabeth Reid (1991) indicate, users are largely preselected by external social structures. Though precise figures for Usenet are impossible to come by, it may be somewhat comparable to CompuServe, a commercial computer network. Of the 69,000 users in 1983, 95 percent were male and 50 percent earned at least $30,000

annually (Carpenter 1983). Because of its public affiliation with universities and businesses, Usenet probably has a higher percentage of women and students and a lower percentage of people under eighteen than some of the commercial networks. At some universities, for instance, all students pay a mandatory fee with their tuition allowing them full access to Usenet (among other computer benefits). Faculty and staff accounts are often available for the asking. While there may be more women on Usenet than on other networks, any casual glance through the newgroups' headers reveals that most groups are dominated by male voices.

R.a.t.s. participants, on the other hand, are primarily women. Judging from the headers of one month's r.a.t.s. posts, of the 492 people who contributed, 60 percent were clearly women, 20 percent clearly male, and another 20 percent had addresses which left gender ambiguous. If one assumes a proportionate split amongst the ambiguous population, r.a.t.s. is approximately 72 percent female and 28 percent male, which represents the gender demographics of American soap opera viewers relatively accurately (Alexander et al. 1992). The r.a.t.s. participants who offer their ages, both male and female, claim for the most part to be between the ages of twenty and fifty.

R.a.t.s. participants are well educated: many have or are pursuing advanced degrees. Just over half (51 percent) gain access through universities. Another 30 percent work for computer companies, many as engineers and other technical specialists, 4 percent work for telecommunication companies, and the final 15 percent work at scientific laboratories, have access through public networks, or work at other businesses. Most read newsgroups while at work or school, often checking in several times each day. That they are at work means, of course, that they are not at home watching soap operas. Soaps are videotaped and saved for evenings and weekends, if they are still watched at all.

There are two ways to participate in any newsgroup, including r.a.t.s. *Lurking* involves reading without ever contributing; *posting* means writing messages. The category of *poster*, however, masks the differences in participant status among posters. Of the 492 posters in October 1991, 187 posted only once during the month, 185 posted two to five times, 73 posted six to ten times, and 45 posted more than ten times. The 187 one-time posters sent 9 percent of the total messages, while those 45 who posted more than ten times sent 44 percent. This demonstrates that a small group of people does most of the performing. This is true in other groups, including mailing lists, I have been involved with. Furthermore, those who are the most prolific on r.a.t.s. tend to maintain that position over time, which means that these heavy posters play powerful roles in shaping group tradition. They generate most of the discourse and carry the highest name recognition. This lends the norms implied by and embedded in their messages a good deal of persuasiveness. In the section that follows I turn to the tradition created by these heavy posters and by those who post less often.

Tradition

Traditionalization occurs through a group's communicative practice (which need be neither face-to-face nor in shared space). As traditionalized ways of speaking emerge, so do conventions about how to mark speech. Conventionalized selectings and groupings of discourse features determine how speech is to be interpreted, yet are usually highly efficient and minute in comparison to the discourse as a whole (Hymes 1975:350). In this section I focus on two conventionalized systems in r.a.t.s., both of which use marking components in the subject line to frame messages. It should be recognized that the subject line is only one of many possible ways to frame a message on r.a.t.s., and I will address others below. The discussion of subject-line markings is meant to illustrate rather than exhaust the processes of traditionalization in r.a.t.s.

Indicating message type with conventionalized subject line components is common across Usenet groups. Talk is often differentiated into an unmarked category and one or more marked categories. "Rec.food.recipes," for instance, distinguishes posted recipes from requests for recipes with the inclusion of "REQUEST:" or "RECIPE:" in the subject line. Erotic stories are often distinguished from discussion in sex-oriented groups with the inclusion of "STORY:" in the subject line. Almost all groups have a subject line labeled "FAQ" (Frequently Asked Questions) to explain group norms and facilitate new users' entry. This highly functional practice enables readers to tailor their involvement. They can use cues to assure that vague subject lines do not lead them away from posts that interest them. In a more extreme act, most newsreaders can be used to construct "kill files," which edit out posts whose subject lines include particular patterns. These conventionalizations allow people to make informed choices about what to read, and hence in which events to participate. In r.a.t.s., subject-line patterns have been innovated to indicate both the soap opera the post addresses and particular genres of post. I will discuss these each in turn.

Cuing soap opera. While r.a.t.s.' concern with the general topic of daytime serials defines the external boundaries of the group, participants use the initials of each soap opera in the subject lines to subdivide the group internally. Identifying which soap opera one is addressing is the first rule of competent communication. One respondent's claim that "the thing most people have a hang-up about is using subject initials in your heading" (questionnaire response, December 2, 1991) exemplifies the group's awareness that not using these initials is likely to irritate others and to result in posts that "flame" or scold violators for the omission. Another technique used to enforce the rule is the regular posting of a r.a.t.s. FAQ that explains the system. This posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, December 5, 1991 is typical:

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One of the following abbreviations should be used at
the beginning of the subject line of all postings to
rec.arts.tv.soaps. For example:
Subject: DOOL - Update for Thursday
or
Subject: SB: CC and Sophia
This will allow those who use rn or any other method of
pre-selecting articles to determine whether they wish
to read the article or not. For information on these
methods see the monthly NEWCOMERS posting by
sally@pixies.proton.com. Remember that if you want to
write about, for example, AMC and GH in the same ar-
ticle, half of your intended audience may filter out
whichever abbreviation you put first. In such a case
you should use the network abbreviation or, as a last
resort, post the article twice.
ALL  - To be seen by all readers of r.a.t.s
ABC  - All ABC daytime soaps (LOV, AMC, OLTL, GH)
CBS  - All CBS daytime soaps (Y&R, B&B, GL, ATWT)
NBC  - All NBC daytime soaps (DOOL, AW, SB)
AMC  - All My Children
AW   - Another World
ATWT - As the World Turns
B&B  - The Bold & the Beautiful
DOOL - Days of Our Lives
GH   - General Hospital
GL   - Guiding Light
LOV  - Loving
OLTL - One Life to Live
SB   - Santa Barbara
Y&R  - The Young & the Restless
HF   - Homefront
KL   - Knot's Landing
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The practicality of this initialing system is obvious. It ensures that people are able to read only the posts which discuss the soap operas they follow. Selectivity is of particular importance in a high-traffic group like r.a.t.s., where reading every post would take well over an hour daily. Many readers, after all, are reading while at work. This system makes the quantity far more manageable. Because people tend not to read posts about soap operas they do not follow, r.a.t.s. actually hosts almost a dozen sub-groups, each of which discusses one serial. There is some overlap in participants between the groups, but not very much. The initial system thus marks not only the soap opera of reference but also the community, and each subgroup of the soap opera fans may have its own traditions.

Genres. Other conventionalized markers are used to cue particular kinds of talk, or genres. Hymes's and Richard Bauman's original formulations of genres suggested that they were meaningful structures maintained through communicative activity. Mikhail Bakhtin, however, has argued for a more dynamic conception, pointing out that genres are "subject to free creative reformulation" and may be mixed, or used with "parodic-ironic reaccentuation" (1986:80). Since Bakhtin's writings were published in English, notions of genre have evolved to emphasize not just the transmission and re-creation of structural regularities, but also the process of strategically using tradition and genre to endow discourse "with dimensions of personal and social meaning" (Bauman 1992a:137). Genres provide access to what is meaningful in a particular speech community, including what is valued, personalized, and granted authority. Genres also provide participants in a community with a resource for invoking the contexts that give their speech meaning. Furthermore, participants create stylistic effects through non-traditional uses of established genres.

R.a.t.s., especially the *All My Children* (AMC) discussants, have traditionalized a number of genres, several of which are cued with conventionalized subject-line components. In this section I discuss AMC because it has been the subject of most of my research and because it has the most subject-line marked genres of the r.a.t.s. subgroups. I chose two weeks, one with heavy postings and one light, to assess how constant the proportions of discussion in each genre were. The two weeks did not differ importantly, so the discussion here will combine the two weeks' results.

The analysis revealed seven categories of discussion, six marked and one unmarked. The marked genres, from least to most common, are *trivia*, *unlurkings*, *sightings*, *spoilers*, *updates*, and *tangents*. The seventh category, which is by far the most common, is unmarked. Drawing on the network-wide use of the term "thread" to describe lines of conversation, I call this genre *new threads*. The frequency data for each genre is summarized in Appendix 1. In what follows I describe the structural features and social functions served by each of these genres and their markings, and discuss the responses each genre evokes.

Trivia posts use the term "trivia" in the subject line. This genre repeats published trivia questions, usually from trivia cards, games or books, and magazines about *All My Children*. The questions, all of which address historical plots and characters, are posted without answers and without evaluative commentary, as in this excerpt from a posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, April 18, 1992:

> Since there was a request for another trivia quiz, here is a new one.
> What little nothing has Phoebe been known to wear to bed to entice Langley?

> Who was the original owner of the Boutique? (It wasn't Myrtle.)
> What other woman used to work at the Boutique, though we'd never see her?
> What kinds of businesses was Jesse in before he was a cop?
> What indignity did Angie suffer when she was a medical student, where and by whom?

Questions are often numbered, and blank spaces are left between them so that people can insert their answers in replies. It is the role of the poster to convey questions and, when people have posted their guesses, to post correct answers. Trivia borrows its name from the broader culture of American entertainment in which r.a.t.s. is nested. Trivia games and game shows have formalized a genre of interactive play based on testing one's store of minute and trivial bits of information. Aside from providing a game for participants to play, the answers to these historical questions occasionally spin off into highly evaluative and extended discussions of the show's past.

Unlurkings, marked by the use of the term "unlurking," "unlurk," or "lurker" in the subject line, are posts in which a new or rare poster introduces herself to the group, as with this posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, September 12, 1992:

> I wanted to introduce myself. My name is Kari Banning. I am a PhD. student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. I have been watching AMC for several years. At first, it was during the summers in the mid to late 70's-back when Erica was involved with Nick and her marriage to Tom (this was while I was in high school). Then I watched during my lunch hour. With the help of my faithful VCR, I have not missed an episode in about 4 years. My husband likes to watch it with me sometimes, but he is not a big fan. I like to read the updates and the posts, but I do not always have the time to read them all. My husband and I do like to know what other AMC fans think of the storylines. That's it for now.

These posts usually specify the poster's name, how long she has been lurking in r.a.t.s., her occupation, often the species and names of pets (especially cats, which seem to be a common link among AMC participants), and almost always general opinions about AMC. Like trivia, unlurkings are regular but rare. This genre is almost exclusively relational in purpose, as unlurkings flag the entry of a new member into the community. Responses to unlurkings work as a welcoming committee, encouraging new or returning participants to remain active voices by letting them know that they have an interested audience.

Sightings, marked as such in the subject line, are reports of having seen a current or former soap opera actor in another context, such as live public appearances, roles in movies, and televised appearances on talk shows, prime time shows, and commercials. This posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps on April 26, 1992 is fairly typical:

> Yep! It's another one of those alumni sightings. I saw Lanie in a commercial for a new kind of Reebok's that has pads in the soles. She said that "these pads" (pointing to the shoes) "get rid of these pads" and points to her behind or thighs. I pointed to the screen and said, "Melanie!" My boyfriend and his brother looked at me like I was crazy. I just explained that it was an AMC thing!

Reports of live appearances are told as highly evaluative first person narratives. They include descriptions of the setting, the audience, and the actor's physical appearance, and recaps of question-answer sessions or actor performances. The teller also describes her emotional reactions and usually repeats a preview or two gleaned from the sighting. Reports of talk show appearances are similar, but usually without the descriptions of setting and audience. Reports on other acting performances such as guest spots and commercials usually focus on the actor's appearance.

One of the more striking genres, *spoilers* are previews culled from magazines, sightings, and other computer networks. This excerpt from a posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, March 5, 1992 is typical:

> Here's a treat you guys that enjoy spoilers!
>
> For next week's AMC:
>
> Mon: Altho Trevor has pulled back from their kiss, Nat asks him to stay. When Adam finds Brian strangling the life out of Will, he realizes he should intervene...shouldn't he?
>
> Tue: Erica proves she's sincere when it comes to being Hailey's friend by putting up Will's bail money. Now that Will is a free man, he asks Hailey if she is ready to perform her wifely duties. Jackson asks Galen if she has set her sights on Trevor.
>
> Wed: After learning that Dixie and Craig are planning to start a family, Stephen asks Joe for a transfer. Hailey gets a chance to get even with Brian when Ed from imigration arrives to question her. An Li tries to comfort Brain with a little passion.

This posting ends, "Wow! Sounds like a great action-packed week!"

Following a Usenet-wide convention, these are called "spoilers" in the subject line. Magazines cited in spoilers include *Soap Opera Digest, Soap Opera Weekly, Soap Opera Monthly,* and *Soap Opera Now.* The two commercial networks referenced are Prodigy and GEnie. Credibility is a key issue underlying spoilers. Those which come from less reputable sources, such as the supermarket tabloid *The Star,* are explicitly marked as dubious, as are those which appear in reputable sources as "predictions" rather than as "previews." It is common for people to follow the spoilers with their own evaluative reactions, though many spoilers do not include opinions. Discussions of spoilers are highly evaluative, voicing opinions on whether or not the events described are desirable and about how they are likely to unfold.

Unlike most genres, spoilers and their subsequent discussion are identified so they can be avoided. The use of the term provides a warning to viewers who do not want to know ahead of time what will happen in the show. This shield is often repeated in the text of the message with the inclusion of another warning followed by a screen of blank lines before the message, or a special character (^L) which prevents the rest of the message from appearing before the reader requests it. This option of reading the group without spoiling the show's suspense is appreciated. As one long-time r.a.t.s. participant explains, "I have found that reading the 'spoilers' every week detracts from my enjoyment of the show. I like being surprised by the show, not by the group! Sometimes I read them anyway, but the majority of the time I do not" (questionnaire response, December 3, 1991). On the other hand, many people like knowing the spoilers. Another participant says, "If there is a spoiler and I already know what's going to happen, I feel more free to do chores while I'm 'watching.' It also prepares me. Reading a spoiler does not 'spoil' it for me" (questionnaire response, December 4, 1991). Spoilers also provide r.a.t.s. readers with status in their interactions with soap opera fans who do not have access to the network. My students, for example, frequently greet me before class with eager inquiries as to the impending outcome of the latest crisis on *All My Children.* That many of r.a.t.s. participants know how the events before they happen suggests that Charlotte Brundson (1989) may be right in her claim that viewers watch soap operas not to see what will happen, but how it will happen.

Updates, marked by "update" and the show's date in the subject line (as in the DOOL example, above) are retellings of the week's daily episodes. Updates are unique in that they are done only by preselected members of the community. The first AMC updater, who once covered all five days of the week, recalls that when she decided to do updates in 1984 no one else was doing them. She began of her own initiative and, when she received grateful e-mail in response, decided to continue (personal e-mail, October 1, 1993). When she tired of it, others volunteered and she handed off each day. The

incumbent updater continues to select a successor. Updating is a time consuming task, and updaters make a substantial commitment to the group.

Updates are by far the longest posts, averaging 172 lines each as opposed to posts in other genres which average only 24 lines. Their content, while rich in the teller's performative style, is primarily informative. Updaters retell each episode in tremendous detail. Evaluations and opinions are embedded in the updates but are clearly framed as separate from the retelling. This is done by stating opinions up front, then using transitions such as "And now on to the update." A more common technique is to embed commentary in brackets with or without the prefix "Ed. note:" to separate it clearly from the story. Those who watch the shows will often read the updates for the style and personal commentary.

Updates allow people who are not able to watch shows to keep up with them. Indeed many people follow the shows for months on end through the updates, seeing the shows only when ill or on vacation. Marking the updates consistently in the subject lines allows such readers to go directly to the updates. If their only need of the group is to keep up with the show, the marked updates save them a tremendous amount of time. If they also want to follow the discussion of the show, updates provide a basis for understanding the group's talk. The almost daily pleas for updates continually reinforce the need for them. The discussion they stimulate involves using the update to frame one's own commentary. While people will occasionally use these posts to modify an update, more commonly they excerpt the relevant section and offer an opinion. Other discussion of updates is more task-oriented, arranging updater switches or substitutions, requesting updates, or thanking the updaters for their work.

Tangents, marked by "TAN" in the subject line, are a default category into which falls all discussion no longer directly related to the soap operas. Tangents reveal people as individuals. As one person says, "I also like the AMC TANS, because it gives you a chance to get to know the poster and then people who post don't seem like faceless people on the other side of the country, they seem like a real person!" (questionnaire response, December 2, 1991). The TANS also allow those who have developed social relationships to enrich them by increasing the breadth of their interaction. A particularly sociable participant explains, "I find the subjects brought up as tangents almost as interesting as the soaps . . . for example, the cross section of rats who are cat lovers, star trekkers, etc. some of us have shared our birthdays, our taste in beer and our butt size. . . . We know who has read GWTW. . . . We know who has PMS . . ." (questionnaire response, December 15, 1991). As the comments about "butt size" and PMS suggest, the tangents are often used as a forum for discussing issues of particular concern to women, including experiences with violence against women, worst dates,

whether or not to change names when marrying, and more. Less gender-bound topics have included how early participants put up their Christmas trees, other television shows, and notorious court cases.

Tangents are the most recently marked form of discourse. In fall 1991, when traffic on the newsgroup began to expand dramatically, people who barely had time to read posts pertaining to the soap operas began to voice irritation with having to weed through unrelated messages. Someone proposed that the convention of marking a subject line with TAN, used in other Usenet newsgroups, be imported, a suggestion that was almost instantaneously adapted with little explicit discussion. This compromise allows people who do not want to read TANs to edit them out fairly simply, while granting those who want them the public ground on which to stray. The genesis of the TAN convention in r.a.t.s. exemplifies the interactive and functional nature of traditionalization on r.a.t.s. and, I suspect, in other computer-mediated cultures.

The final category, *new threads*, is unmarked. It includes posts which first raise topics related to the soap opera. Subject lines usually identify the topic by character or characters, as with "AMC: Dixie and Brian" but can contain any of a range of components. New threads are mainly interpretive evaluations. They pool opinion, they criticize, they predict, they parody, and so on. They are the most common genre, constituting the majority of the group's activity. The category also includes many sub-categories, such as "predictions," which guess at the show's future, and "comments," which offer evaluation of the show. Neither of these monikers is employed consistently in subject lines, however. Alessandro Duranti writes that "although the presence of a lexical term for a given activity or 'strip of interaction' is only one level of local organization of experience—perhaps the most obviously ideological—the lack of a term for any given such 'strip' is an interesting clue for fieldworkers" (1988:220). The fact that new threads and their subsequent discussions are not explicitly named in the subject lines suggests that interpretive evaluation of the soap opera is considered the norm, and that the named genres indicate perceived variations from that norm.

The variation from the norm, I argue, lies in the claims other genres make to authority and the degree of personalization they allow. New threads are explicit interpretations. They are thus inherently personalized yet constrained by the soap opera. As interpretations, they make few claims to authority. In fact, r.a.t.s. participants actively discourage the claiming of authority. Trivia, sightings, spoilers, and updates, on the other hand, are genres invoked in part to invest a message with external authority—primarily that of the soap opera press and the soap opera itself. The flip side of claiming such authority is excluding or bracketing one's own perspective. Unlurkings and tangents allow more extensive personalization than new threads do by straying further from the topic of soap operas. In short, the

lack of a subject-line marker for new threads is a clue to the fact that the community's primary mission is as a forum for publicly negotiating soap opera interpretations. This receives further support in my analysis of performance in the next section.

The use of conventionalized discourse features in subject lines illuminates many of the concerns and processes which are used to organize and create distinctive communities on r.a.t.s. Central to this analysis, and to the one that follows, is that traditionalization is a pragmatic process. The acronym system used to label the soap opera functions to identify and maintain subgroups and to allow participants differential access to each. The use of these acronyms delimits topical boundaries but also positions the poster as a participant in a pre-existing stream of discussion. The labeling system for the keying of genre also functions to allow people differential access to different kinds of messages, but here the distinction is not based on topic so much as on authority or personalism. Both sets of markers exemplify traditionalization in the group and name talk in ways both meaningful and practical for the participants. The markers also serve as strategic resources whose use situates the message in the group's historical context, reaffirms that context, and positions the poster as a competent member of the community.

Performance

If genre is the "what" of recurrent forms of speech, performance is the "how" (Hymes 1975:351). In this section I turn from tradition as embodied in subject-line conventions to performance in the sense of framing one's communicative activity as open for evaluation in terms of competence and skill. Communicative practice can vary in its performative intensity: "persons may engage in a genre without engaging in performance" (Hymes 1985:352).

In newsgroups all posts are open to evaluation. Given that the option of lurking always exists, those who contribute feel they have something of significance either to add or to ask. R.a.t.s. is characterized in part by a politeness norm against wasting readers' time (Baym, in progress). I suspect that the responsibility to be stimulating characterizes most newsgroup participation, though standards of what is "stimulating" vary wildly. A lurker alluded to this responsibility when she responded to a post which thanked her for unlurking to post a *New Yorker* magazine article about AMC. In a posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, June 23, 1993, she replied:

> I'm also glad for the chance to add something to this ongoing stimulating dialogue!! I've been lurking for several weeks now, but rarely post, since you all seem to already have so many fun things to say!

Keying performance. Like genres, performance is keyed through conventionalized means including "a wink, gesture, posture, style of dress, musical accompaniment . . . English aspiration and vowel length to signal emphasis" (Hymes 1986:62). The computer medium seems at first glance to eliminate just these kinds of cues and might therefore be considered an unlikely medium in which to take responsibility for performance. Work such as Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel, and Timothy W. McGuire's 1984 study of socioemotional communication via computer, and Lee Sproull and Sara Kiesler's *Connections* (1991) argues for such a cues-filtered-out model of computer-mediated communication. However, given time, participants respond to this deprivation by creating new ways to convey crucial metacommunicative information. The nonverbal cues necessary to frame performance are reinvented within the limits and possibilities of the ascii text format.

Emoticons (or "smiley faces"), pictorial representations of emotional expressions, are one of the more striking developments. Built from punctuation marks and meant to be viewed sideways (left is up), they have been used commonly in computer-mediated interaction since 1980 (Raymond 1991). The dozens of variations on the smiley face are used primarily to key the talk as sarcastic, humorous, or affiliative. Smiley-face dictionaries are compiled and circulated throughout Usenet. The most common emoticons include:

:-) smile

:-(frown

;-) wink

Users compensate for the absence of face-to-face social cues in other ways as well. They use capital letters to indicate emphasis, as in this posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, November 27, 1991:

> . . . [w]hen he handed her that BOULDER of a diamond . . .

Emphasis can also be marked by bracketing a word with asterisks or underlines. Vowels are elongated by repeating the keystrokes. Participants also use bracketed explicit references to nonverbal movements such as *yawn*, *sigh*, and [g] for grin. In short, Usenet participants, including those on r.a.t.s., have translated faces into ascii text format and use them much as they would in face-to-face talk. The development and invocation of these cues is in itself a process of traditionalization that spans the computer-mediated subculture.

Evaluating performance. Central to the definition of performance is the idea of an evaluating audience. Since performance is communication to be evaluated, its analysis allows the researcher considerable insight into the concerns and interests of the community. A culture's analysis of what constitutes "skill" and "effectiveness" in its own talk is a privileged entryway

into the underlying interests that organize group life (Bauman 1992b). In this section I examine what constitutes "good" performance on r.a.t.s.

Participants in r.a.t.s. use three methods to compliment skilled performances: they respond to them, they thank their senders, and they offer explicit praise. Receiving responses is considered flattering and fairly exciting, and the hope of receiving responses often motivates performance. For example, in response to one man's question as to whether or not he ought to feel foolish for being so excited at having received a response to his first post, an active poster (posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, October 28, 1991) assured him:

> I can tell you that when I made *my* first posts (and they were rather brief) I wanted nothing more than a lengthy reply. In fact, lots of lengthy replies. The worst feelings I ever had was when I thought I was bringing up something interesting and got *no* replies. That bothered me. . . .

As this suggests, without replies there is no way of assessing whether others found one's contribution worthwhile or competent, let alone skilled. Not all competent performances necessarily receive responses. Particularly skilled performances, however, are almost always rewarded with explicit praise.

Participants in r.a.t.s. differ in what they want from r.a.t.s. posts and hence in how they evaluate their merits. All agree, however, that r.a.t.s. is first and foremost meant to be fun. As one participant tells me, "I don't read [r.a.t.s.] to get job-related information or anything to help me in my daily life (well, just to get my daily 'soap fix,' but I don't think that counts :-}); it's just a fun way to pass a few minutes and hopefully hear some news about my two soaps (GH and OLTL)" (questionnaire response, November 27, 1991). Another woman agrees, "I prefer humorous posts. Insightful ones are also favorites. . . . We're mostly intelligent people with interesting ideas. I like to see posts that live up to our potential" (questionnaire response, December 1, 1991). Though there are occasional innovative exceptions, four ways of living up to the group's performative potential consistently emerge in r.a.t.s. These criteria of skilled performance are humor, insight, distinctive personality, and politeness.

Soap operas often bring to mind images of characters wrapped in constant melodrama, crisis, and emotional torment. Except for the laugh with which they are often dismissed, soap operas are rarely taken to evoke humor. However, there is little praise higher on r.a.t.s. than to be told you made someone laugh, and being a funny poster is a particularly effective way to forge a known identity in the group. When I asked what makes a poster successful, I often received answers along the lines of "Well, a good sense of humor, definitely. I love the posts from people who are funny!" (questionnaire response, December 2, 1991), and "I believe funny and creative posts are the most fun" (questionnaire response, December 9, 1991).

Much of the humor on r.a.t.s. achieves its impact at the soap opera's expense. That fans would seek to transform the show's shortcomings into a form of humor for group pleasure is understandable on two counts. First, fans have a strong need to grapple with the show's weaknesses and transform them into something worthwhile. Second, humor provides a way to enhance social affiliation, which is especially vulnerable when the show fails to entertain. Media fan scholar Henry Jenkins writes:

> The fans' response typically involves not simply fascination or adoration but also frustration and antagonism, and it is the combination of the two responses which motivates their active engagement with the media. Because popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them . . . because the texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests. Far from syncopathic, fans actively assert their mastery over the mass-produced texts which provide the raw materials for their own cultural productions and the basis for their social interactions. (1992:23)

By making fun of the soap opera, r.a.t.s. participants, all of whom are soap opera fans, appropriate the weaknesses in the show and transform them into unique performances which themselves become a locus of group pleasure. This transformation helps keep the fans engaged, even when the soap opera fails to entertain on its own terms. Simultaneously, as the transformation takes on familiar forms over time, particular types of humor are traditionalized and serve salient functions in creating community.

One conventionalized form of humor is "aptonyms," or "names that are in some way appropriate to [the person's] characteristics" (Nilsen 1993:68). The AMC group, for example, nicknamed the naive and stupid Dixie, "Ditsie"; her sleazy brother Will, "Swill"; and the controlling Dimitri, "Dementri" then "Dimwit." The DOOL group, too, savors the creative use of nicknames creating, in one case, a contest-like quality to the ever-changing nicknames of Isabella (called "Izzy-B" by her on-screen lover), including"Izzamomma2B" when her pregnancy was announced, and "Izzachameleonlivingonmyhead" in criticism of her ever-changing hair color. Known within the group as "nicknames," they are explicitly recognized as comprehensible only to group members. Nicknames can be very confusing to group newcomers, or in the case of some of the more obscure nicknames, to someone who missed a critical post. Thus there are occasional requests for clarification of nicknames, which are always answered quickly, usually by several people.

Nicknames are sometimes proposed explicitly, but more often they are simply slipped into new threads or updates. Those which are found apt, funny, and manageable are often adopted quickly. Since these nicknames are based on critical interpretations of the characters, their status as tradition within the group demonstrates some consensus on how to evaluate the

soap opera, as well as how to evaluate a good nickname. On one hand, their evolution documents and institutionalizes the community's shifting relationship to the soap opera and its characters. There are some nicknames, on the other hand, which are used only by single performers. One *All My Children* updater, for instance, has an extensive set of nicknames which rarely appear anywhere but in his updates. In this case, the use of nicknames marks personal style as well as group beliefs.

"Soap opera laws" are another conventionalized form of humor. Accompanied with absurdly high or precise numbers, such as "Soap Opera Law 462" or "Soap Opera Law N-533-2a," these laws include soap opera truisms, such as "If you only have sex once you will certainly become pregnant," and "If a figure referred to in someone's past who never had a name suddenly gets a name they will soon show up in town." These principles are based on advanced expertise in reading the genre, and their humor affirms the group's extended soap opera competence. Since these laws so often point out soap opera's absurdity, their articulation also helps members establish an explicit awareness of its absurdity that distances them from it and, indeed, makes that absurdity a source of humor in its own right.

Humorous lists are another genre of humor on r.a.t.s. Borrowing a humor genre from David Letterman, some participants write Top Ten Lists, such as the top ten bad acting performances on *General Hospital.* People have also created Top 40 song lists attributing real recorded songs to characters to whom the titles are relevant. New lyrics to familiar songs are also a popular form of humor, especially in the DOOL group. During a particularly dull period of AMC, Natalie's insane sister Janet (known on the net as "JaNut") left her down a well for over a month in an effort to steal her fiance, Trevor (nicknamed "Porkchop" by his on-screen niece), by pretending to be Natalie. A few AMC regulars collaborated on the song "Nat's in the Well" to be sung to the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell":

```
And Nat's in the well
And Nat's in the well
Hi Ho the dreary-o
Nat's in the well
```

The verses that follow (only the first line of each verse is included here) summarize the story line and r.a.t.s. discussions of it, as well as offer a few comical resolutions of the story line:

```
Trevor takes a "wife" . . .
The "wife" is a nut  . . .
The viewers are not pleased . . .
The Nut wants to bop . . .
No whappa says the doc . . .
She drops some big-time clues . . .
```

```
Porkchop can't "buy a vowel" . . .
Nat needs a loo . . .
A doggie finds Nat blue . . .
The dog knows what to do . . .
He jumps JaNut, pinning her to the ground and rips out
   her throat . . .
Nat comes back way pissed and kicks everyone out of the
   house . . .
Arlene gets out of prison, moves in and becomes Nat's
   lesbian lover . . .
Trevor buys a clue . . .
Too bad he had to screw . . .
Haley wacks the nut . . .
```

The complete version of this song was posted to rec.arts.tv.soaps, October 7, 1991. Over a year later, when Erica was left in a crypt to die, one AMC participant reprised the first verse of the song with the lyrics "Erica's in the crypt."

These forms of humor, along with countless others, function to enhance social affiliation among group members as well as to poke fun at their shared show. In part, this is done through traditionalization. By using the same nickname, participants align themselves interpretively with one another. Similar social alignment occurs when participants collaborate on lists or song lyrics. Affiliation is also facilitated by the fact that people so often try to make one another laugh. As John Morreall argues, "Sharing humor with others, then, is a friendly social gesture. It shows our acceptance of them and our desire to please them . . . [humor] set[s] up the mood of acceptance and make[s] the other person relax" (1983:115).

The use of humor as a criterion in evaluating performance on r.a.t.s. is directly related to important functional concerns in the group. It helps keep fans entertained during times when a soap opera may fail to do so, and it helps to create an accepting and caring group atmosphere. I argued in discussing the unmarked genre of new threads that r.a.t.s. is above all a forum for the pooling of evaluative interpretations. Humor helps to create a friendly and open environment that encourages participants to leap in and voice their own opinions.

Humor acts as a standard for evaluating performance in many other computer-mediated cultures as well. In fact, it is common enough that conventionalized ways of acknowledging humorous performances have emerged across the computer-mediated subculture. The acronym ROTFL or ROFL, for instance, is used across many networks to mean "rolling on the floor laughing." In r.a.t.s., praise for humor often appears as variations on two themes: "I laughed so hard everyone in my office knew I wasn't working," and "I laughed so hard I spit on my screen." The former can be seen in this excerpt from a post (rec.arts.tv.soaps, November 8, 1991) praising two people, one for writing a parody combining the theme song from a show

about a talking horse with a character many compared to a horse, and the other for pointing out the absurdities of soap opera life:

> I didn't write down the name of the person who wrote the theme song for Kim (done to the song Mr. Ed.) But, thank you that was sooooooooooo funny.
>
> And Tom. when I read:
>
> >I notice stuff like this too. Also, why doesn't anyone
> >lock their doors, go to the bathroom, sneeze, yawn,
> >burp, fart, watch the road when they drive, or forget
> >why they got up to do something?
> I was laughing so hard, everyone knew I wasn't working.

The second criterion applied in evaluating r.a.t.s. performance is its degree of insightfulness into the soap opera. While humor is always highly performative, insight may be more or less performative, depending largely on whether it is based on interpretation or information. Interpretive insights are often performative, as much of the humor I discussed above demonstrates. The aptonyms, for instance, work because they capture a character's essence. Here I will discuss in turn the insightful criteria of being informative and providing new perspectives.

To be involved in r.a.t.s. at all one has to be aware of what is happening on the soap opera. Without knowledge of the latest characters, twists, and turns, one cannot follow even the simplest of r.a.t.s. discussions. For the participants who do not have the time or means to watch the soap, then, the "good" posts are the ones that enable them to keep up with both the soap opera and the discussion. They are the ones, in other words, that emphasize retelling (or pre-telling) over interpreting. As one woman says, "My favorite r.a.t.s. posters are the ones who post summaries and interesting tidbits about 'my' two soaps, since I don't generally tape or watch them and that's my only way of keeping track of what's happening on them. :-)" (questionnaire response, November 27, 1991).

The most often praised informative post is the update, though updates are also praised for their humorous asides and narrative style of the tellings rather than the helpful fidelity of the retelling. Updaters are sometimes praised solely for their dedication to the onerous task. This excerpt from a post (to rec.arts.tv.soaps, October 8, 1991) praises the AMC updaters for carrying out their duties during Natalie's boring well saga. Again it is evident here that praise can itself be performative and can draw on the community's tradition:

> I wish to dedicate the following verses to Cindy, Carol, Andrea, Dana, Lyle, and the subsitutes.
>
> You put up with some uttterly boring shows
> You put up with some uttterly boring shows

```
Hi ho the dreary-o
You put up with some uttterly boring shows

You still did the updates
You still did the updates
Hi ho the dreary-o
You still did the updates

We thank you very much
We thank you very much
Hi ho the dreary-o
We thank you very much
```

Other informative posts are spoilers, sightings, and those that pass information about soap opera production from sightings and the soap press. All participants can use this information to guess at the impact cast changes will have on story lines. The insight these posts generate stems mainly from the information transmitted rather than poster skill. Thus they often receive thanks, but rarely receive praise.

Another informative posting is the retelling of a show's deep history. Some soap operas have been on the air for over fifty years: *As the World Turns* and *Guiding Light* predate television; *Days of Our Lives, All My Children, General Hospital,* and *One Life to Live* have all been broadcast for over twenty years. While soap operas continually repeat themselves in order to bring new viewers up to date, it would be impossible to repeat this entire history. Edward J. Whetmore and Alfred P. Kielwasser (1983) have argued that the more viewers know about the show's history, the more fully they can understand the soap and the more pleasure they can gain from storyline resolutions. Retellings of and reminiscing about a show's past provide deep history which allows participants more insight into the current episodes. For example, when the character of Brooke on *All My Children* hired a man who had served time for stalking his ex-wife to work at her magazine, many r.a.t.s. participants were dismayed. Those who knew the show's history were especially certain Brooke would never have done this and, to support their claim, retold for the others how Brooke herself had been victimized by a stalker many years earlier.

Confused viewers who have missed something in either deep or recent soap history frequently ask for history lessons when they do not understand something. They thus encourage those with good memories to perform. Answers are usually posted within a few days at the most. Long-time watchers with good memories and/or electronic soap opera archives are able both to answer these questions and to stake out roles as resident history experts. This *Santa Barbara* fan demonstrates his ability to retell deep history in this excerpt from a post (rec.arts.tv.soaps, November 22, 1991; all ellipses are the poster's own):

> Also . . . I keep a SB archive, in it I will copy this file. If anybody is interested, I have archived a copy that somebody had of all the soap opera actors' birthdays (all soaps included), where to write to SB, history of Brandon, Channing, SB parentage. Just e-mail me if you're interested.
>
> Here's an sample, it may be outdated by now:
>
> here's a partial santa barbara family tree ...
> pamela & cc were married & had mason. pamela had an affair with hal clark (scott's uncle). she & cc divorced but she was carrying cc's child (the writer's never quite explained why it wasn't hal's kid). nevertheless, unbeknownst to cc, pamela had his daughter, elena. she was raised by dr. alex nikolas (cc's enemy who always loved pamela). cc finds out about her about 30 years later when she starts terrorizing the acknowledged capwell children (esp. eden & mason). this story gets really convoluted so i'll just point out the highlights. around the same time jeffrey & alex came to town for revenge on cc (because of his treatment of pamela) jeffrey & kelly fell in love & married . . . & divorced. elena was shot & cruz was accused . . . turned out she comitted suicide. alex left town after he realized he could never have pamela (BTW, pamela showed up during cruz' trial).
>
> i hope this helps. . . .

Finally, participants in r.a.t.s. pool information culled from their own areas of expertise, usually to assess (and often to criticize) a show's realism. This kind of informative performance applies specialized real-world knowledge to the soap opera in ways that enhance either soap absurdity or soap realism. An example of the former was seen when Adam, on *All My Children*, revealed that Erica and he were never legally divorced seven years earlier because his identical twin, Stuart, impersonated him at the proceedings (a plot twist that had been predicted by history-oriented AMC posters many months earlier). The legally curious viewers researched the legal implications of the scenario and posted their findings to rec.arts.tv.soaps, December 13, 1991:

> I got interested in the legality of what they're doing here, too, and did a little research.
>
> Bigamy is defined as follows: the criminal offense of willfully and knowingly contracting a second marriage

> (or going through the form of a second marriage) while the first marriage, to the knowledge of the offender is still subsisting and undissolved.
>
> Translation: Adam is the criminal here; Erica is the innocent victim.
>
> As far as the Troll's [Erica's daughter] legitimacy goes, she has full civil rights. About theonly thing she could suffer would be a loss of her right to inherit from her father (and that's not going to happen). It would *NOT*, I repeat would *NOT* factor into her custody arrangements. The welfare of the child is what is considered.
>
> Erica's various marriages since Adam and Brooke's, Nat's, & Dixie's marriages to Adam are considered "putative". A putative marriage is one in which, ingood faith and in ignorance (on one or both sides) of impediments that exist which render it unlawful, a marriage was contracted.
>
> At the very least Adam is guilty of actionable fraud—deception practiced in order to induce another to part with property or to surrender some legal right . . . the essential ingredient is a falsehood uttered with intent to deceive . . . Adam was aware that the divorce was false.
>
> Erica could have one hefty lawsuit on her hands.

This activity is carried on persistently, even on points as minor as the use of the word "megasecond" (posting to rec.arts.tv.soaps, December 18, 1991):

> I was looking for someone else to catch this and post on it, but noone has, so I will . . .
>
> During this same conversation on Thursday's show, Julie had some quick little comeback for Chip that went something like "for just a megasecond, I thought you had some substance" . . . I'm not sure about what came after the word megasecond, but I know she used the expression 'for just a megasecond'. I actually missed it when it went by the first time, but my husband (the reluctant--or so he says--DOOL watcher) said 'WHAT?!" and rewound the tape and played it over like 5 times because he got such a hoot out of it. He then got a calculator and figured out that a megasecond was approximately 11 1/2 days. I guess Susan Seaforth Hayes is an actress, not a brain surgeon (or an engineer).

As both these examples illustrate, providing information can be humorous as well. Single performances can appeal to multiple standards of evaluation.

Finally, insight into the show can be offered without informing the others of anything but one's own reading of the soap opera text. These insightful new perspectives are favorites in the group. Says one poster, "Usually the best [posts] are ones that are either people's own views on what happened on a soap opera, or new plot ideas" (questionnaire response, December 2, 1991). As a particularly articulate r.a.t.s. woman explains, "Every viewer projects their own experiences on to what is happening on the soap, so everyone interprets the storylines a little differently" (questionnaire response, November 2, 1991). When personal interpretations are voiced, they become communal resources for interpreting the show. One woman, for instance, writes, "Often, the insights of others get me changing the way I view a character or a storyline (eg. someone provides history of a show, I wasn't aware of, or someone points out an aspect I didn't see before)" (questionnaire response, December 1, 1991).

Insight, like humor, emerges as a measure of performance for functional reasons related to participants' relationships both with the soap opera and with one another. Soap operas are what Robert Allen (1985) calls an "overcoded" form, meaning that they offer more possible interpretations than are necessary to move the narrative forward. Because of this, the text can support multiple legitimate interpretations. Part of the pleasure of being a soap opera fan is negotiating these interpretations with others. Indeed it can be argued that this pleasure is one of the major modes of engaging with the soap opera narrative. "Half the fun of watching," says one participant, "is comparing notes and speculations with others!" (questionnaire response, November 27, 1991). The favoring of posts that provide insight into the soap opera reflects soap fans' need for a forum in which to pool their personalized understandings and to keep up with the drama. One social consequence of pooling this insight is the creation of a vast body of public knowledge and opinions to which all group members share access. The fact that they are so well informed moves them out of the class of most soap opera fans in their local communities and aligns them instead with other r.a.t.s. users.

A third criterion for assessing performative skill on r.a.t.s. is the degree of individuality with which one invests one's posts. Most scholars of computer-mediated communication have argued that, in addition to reducing the conventional cues used to frame talk, the lack of visual and auditory information in computer-mediated talk reduces most cues to status, appearance, identity, and gender (Kiesler, Siegel, and McGuire 1984; Cheseboro and Bonsall 1989; Raymond 1991; Reid 1991). Some hold that this lack of information inevitably reduces the communicators to anonymity, which would seem to prevent the formation of true community. However, regular readers of a group use a number of cues to create personalities for them-

selves and to identify others immediately. Bauman has argued that "the identities of the participants must be investigated in their own right, as part of an overall communication system, whose character is defined by the interrelationships among its components and not by any single one" (1971:38). With this point he emphasizes that people can engage in folkloric performance together even when they are members of different groups. To an extent this differential identity characterizes most r.a.t.s. interactants, who, in Dundes's (1977) words are "part-time folk." Bauman's point takes on an angle he may not have foreseen, however, when applied to computer-mediated interaction. In a computer-mediated group, differential identity can be seen as a creative accomplishment resulting from intentional efforts to create a community populated by distinctive personalities.

Individualizing is a desirable accomplishment in r.a.t.s., as illustrated by such comments as "the most successful r.a.t.s. posters" are "the ones who interject their own personalities into theirs posts, whether by a .sig [signature] file that reveals things about them, or by making comments about their personal lives" (questionnaire response, December 15, 1991). A *Days of Our Lives* participant incorporates the idea of personality as a determinant of skill in his description of what makes a good poster: "The willingness to express their feelings and opinions, and stand behind them. Uniqueness of posting style (so long as it's positive uniqueness). A sense of humor. A non-grating personality" (questionnaire response, December 10, 1991). The quest to establish distinct (and non-grating) personalities in a sea of similar-looking posts is also manifested in users' frequent references to one another by name and even occasional "roll calls" urging both lurkers and posters to introduce themselves to the group at large. It can also be seen in the traditionalization of unlurkings and TANS, both of which are designed to allow room for personal discussion that goes beyond the soap opera.

The cues used to create distinct identities include signature files, which are several lines posters can attach automatically to the end of all their posts. Signature files (also known as "sig files") usually have a name, affiliation, e-mail address, and quotation of some sort. Other individuating cues include the names at the end of messages, consistent message formatting styles (such as unusually wide margins, a distinctive opening phrase, or bordering the top and bottom of one's message with asterisks), distinctive writing style, explicit self-disclosure, and the fulfillment of particular social roles in the community, such as updater. Being especially humorous or insightful are also ways to emerge as an individual personality.

Another route to establishing a public identity on the group is the use of self-disclosure. Because of the issues around which soap operas revolve, self-disclosures are often highly personal. African Americans, Asian Americans, and gays have described their own experiences as victims of racism and homophobia when similar events are depicted on the shows. Women have

told of being raped or beaten when discussing story lines dealing with these traumas. For example, in this post (to rec.arts.tv.soaps, October 19, 1992), a known personality in the AMC group uses a personal narrative to justify her view of the show's portrayal of the wife-beating villain, Carter Jones (who was masquerading under the pseudonym "Kyle"):

> Friday's episode was very difficult to watch. I am a bit upset with the writers for turning Carter/Kyle into this wild maniac.
>
> Most abusive husbands/boyfriends are NOT people that go around kidnapping their loves. They are everyday, run-of-the-mill folks who have a VERY violent streak inside them.
>
> The writers started out great by portraying a man who was "sorry" each time he beat a woman. They even did good by portraying Carter as a manipulative man, making the woman feel as though a beating was HER fault.
>
> But now, by making Carter into this kidnapping, vindictive, "I-am-going-to-steal-your-wife" creature -- JUST to give NewNat another "I need Saving" storyline is just too much. It is an insult to any woman who has been on the receiving end of an abusive person.
>
> I was on the receiving end just ONCE--but it was enough to make me get an immediate annulment from a mistake-of-a-marraige. AMC portrayed my ex to a "T" (professional, likable)--but completely lost me when they started this ridiculous story with Nat. . . .

The personal narrative is used to ground the poster's criticism of the show in real-life expertise and thus could be evaluated in terms of the insight it provides. At the same time, it works on the level of personalism, helping to replace the anonymity of the newsgroup with real people living real lives.

Over time, these cues to personality fill in the identities of active participants so that shared knowledge goes far beyond the soaps and into other aspects of each other's lives. R.a.t.s. participants have turned to the group for support during such frightening events as being robbed, harassed, or divorced, and such positive events as getting married, having children, and even being reunited with children given up for adoption decades earlier. The personalism brought into the group thus not only allows for richer interpretations, but also allows the group to function as a supportive community in which people are able to share their own experience as well as to dissect the experiences of the soap opera's fictional communities.

The valuing of individuality, just like the prizing of humor and insight, therefore relates to the need of soap opera fans to share and compare

personalized interpretations of the show. The creation of a community of real people through disclosure, TANS, unlurkings, and the many other cues mentioned is the creation of a community in which it is easy for people to share their personalized interpretations. The value of personality can also be seen as a way to encourage people to be funny or insightful. Funny people, clever people, and even those who simply take the time to type in articles and tidbits from magazines are able to establish identities for themselves on the strength of such performances. Being recognized as an individual, known by name within the community, is an end toward which many participants strive.

However, emergence of particular individuals as established within a community brings with it the potential for tension with those who are less known. In the DOOL group, for instance, a heated argument was prompted by a new poster who felt he was not granted the status he deserved for his inside connection to the show and the spoilers he shared. He argued he was being excluded by a tight-knit clique whose dominance squelched dissenting voices. The emergence of apparent "in groups" within the r.a.t.s. community would seem to make personal interpretations posted by known identities more authoritative than others and hence more difficult to discount publicly. Since the group exists largely to compare viewpoints, such potential authority can actually work against the group's coherence, pushing out those who would disagree with big name posters. The potential interpretive authority of the well known r.a.t.s. participants is actively discouraged, however, through the basic standard of politeness which cuts across r.a.t.s.

While humor, insight, and personality contribute to making a post stand out as particularly good, politeness is a criterion of communicative competence that keeps posts from standing out as particularly bad. Posts are never commended for being especially polite, but those considered rude are quickly reprimanded. Says one participant, "The r.a.t.s. standard can be summed up for me as 'polite.' Whenever any participant deviates from politeness, the rest of the group is quick to bring him/her into line. Negative comments and opinions are tolerated (and even encouraged) as long as another PERSON is not attacked" (questionnaire response, December 3, 1991). This summarizes r.a.t.s. politeness in a nutshell: do not attack others personally for disagreeing with your opinion. Interpretations, in other words, are always to be put forward and taken as just that. A poster can seem rude simply by implying that others *should* see things as she does. "I like the summaries and the comments that come across as *comments* not forced opinions," one woman tells me. She continues, "I enjoy reading ones that let you think what you want and ask for opinions and other thoughts" (questionnaire response, December 6, 1991).

As I mentioned earlier, soap operas encourage multiple interpretations. But while there is pleasure in the voicing of multiple interpretations, there is always the potential for conflict, especially given the emotional attachments viewers form with soap opera characters and the emotional issues around which soap opera storylines revolve. If conflicts were to become personal (or degenerate into what are called "flame wars"), people would be inhibited from contributing potentially controversial opinions, and the primary function of the group as an interpretive forum would be disrupted. After the flame war among the followers of *Days Of Our Lives* mentioned above, one long-time participant, posted this "netiquette" post (rec.arts.tv.soaps, December 31, 1991), which explicates the nuances of the tolerance norm and the reasoning behind it:

> Some of you will have noticed that I have been conspicuously silent over the past few months. While this was mostly due to things getting VERY busy at work and at home, some of it was because I didn't want to get involved in the recent DOOL wars. Things seem quieter now, and per several requests I would like to note some simple suggestions that we can all follow to make this newsgroup the consistently friendly place it used to be.
>
> FIRST AND FOREMOST remember that the net is populated by PEOPLE not computers. What you say CAN hurt. It is very difficult to judge someone's feelings when you can't see their face, so you have to be extra careful about EVERYTHING you post.
>
> If something makes you angry, take a break before you reply or post a response. Then COUNT TEN and reread your reply or followup before you send it.
>
> IN FACT, reread everything you post before you send it. Make sure you have actually struck the tone you meant to. Ask yourself if anything you have written can be taken the wrong way. REWRITE until you get it right.
>
> Remember that opinions are OPINIONS, not facts. Opinions can be diametrically opposed and still be valid. It's ok to disagree with someone's opinion, but don't turn that into an attack on the person.
>
> WATCH YOUR PHRASING. Unless you know someone very well and are sure how they will react to a jesting insult, treat them and their opinions like you were walking on eggshells. If you make a joke, make sure you indicate it clearly. Learn and USE the smiley :-).

> Conversely, don't take things that people write to you or post PERSONALLY. Whether they are directly or indirectly insulting to you, FORGIVE and FORGET. Don't start a flame war. Remember that such postings and letters are written out of frustration and anger. We all want the things that we love to be the best they can be. But all things (soaps especially, it seems) go through their good times and bad. If things don't seem so bad to you, remember that your favorite characters may be doing quite well, while someone else's are being drug through the abyss of bad writing.
>
> Also remember that r.a.t.s. in particular is populated by young, old, and in-between. Rashness is a trait of youth. Learn not to be rash back. If someone is behaving badly, either ignore it or take it to email. Criticizing someone in public embarrasses everyone and doesn't usually fix the problem. If you must, write a gentle letter explainly why the behavior is inappropriate. Remember, FLAMES BEGAT FLAMES.
>
> We warmly welcome all those who join our little group whether as lurkers or posters. We hope that all lurkers will become posters after they have taken the time to get to know us. It is variety of opinion that keeps our discussions going and our minds open. Also note that opinion changes overtime. If you like (or hate) someone that everybody else seems to hate (or love), it may simply be that you are leading (or trailing) the pack. It may also be that those who share your opinion are keeping quiet in the face of what they think is overwhelming disagreement. But you'll never find those like-minded folks by keeping quiet. Organize your thoughts, marshall your reasons, and step boldly forward. Maybe you'll even change the minds of some of us old fogeys.

Being rude, as this post explains, is accomplished through personal attacks or self-righteousness. Being polite rests largely on the use of qualifiers which explicitly locate interpretations as personal perceptions (Baym, in progress). These qualifiers include "I thought that . . . ," "my take was . . . ," and the ever-popular network-wide acronyms IMHO (in my humble opinion) and IMNSHO (in my not-so-humble opinion). Other politeness strategies including preceding interpretive disagreements with explicit agreements and providing extended reasoning to justify such disagreements.

This overwhelming regard for the right to have one's own opinion is quite different from most of the groups on Usenet, which frequently hurl insults

over even the most minor of disagreements. The friendliness engendered by adherence to the norm of tolerance on r.a.t.s. is one of the features participants find particularly compelling. One heavy poster claims that "what attracted me to r.a.t.s in the first place was the friendly atmosphere" (questionnaire response, December 1, 1991). Indeed, the only group any participant described as friendlier is that devoted to dog ownership, rec.pets.dogs. As a participant in both groups describes (questionnaire response, December 6, 1991):

> The group in which I find the most flame wars (thus the least friendly and supportive in my opinion) is a local group uw.general for posting things mainly affecting our school or community. There are others I just read for information, for example, rec.food.recipes, comp.object. I would put rec.arts.tv.soaps right under rec.pets.dogs, for friendliness, support, warm, lack of flame wars (in Y&R anyway, which is the only soap I watch and read about), in general, overall enjoyment.

Summary. In this section I have discussed four criteria by which performance is evaluated: humor, insight, individuality, and politeness. These are not entirely separate standards; indeed they are intricately interwoven. All four stem directly from the group's needs as soap opera fans. In a nutshell, the interest that motivates these criteria is in supporting each reader's personalized involvement with the soap opera while providing alternative perspectives to augment and compare with one's own. The criteria used to evaluate performance emerge from the participants' interaction with three features of soap operas: soaps lend themselves to multiple interpretations, they are about emotionality, and their quality is inconsistent. Their over-coded nature makes comparing perspectives both possible and fun. Their emotionality demands that fans bring their own personalities and life experiences into their messages. The important interpretive insight that can be gained from the experiences of others creates a need to make sure it is safe to express personalized opinions on r.a.t.s. From this need for safety come the norm of tolerance and the efforts at personalization and humor. The humor and social supportiveness of r.a.t.s. also function to keep viewers interested when the soaps are not as good as they would like.

Conclusion

Let me return to the issue of technology's impact on folkloric practice. This paper makes clear that computer networks provide links that can facilitate the creation of new folkgroups. Computer networks are certainly no threat to folklore. They are also far more than a medium of transmission or a rich

topic for new jokes. R.a.t.s. demonstrates that these networks can serve as the site for complex, interwoven, and personalized communities. These communities exist in asynchronous time and without shared location. As a result they rely more than ever on the traditionalization of communicative practice. In such a context, folklore is the only means to transform individual users from an anonymous collection of voices into a group.

This phenomenon of computer-mediated communities is far broader than Usenet. The Internet hosts Internet Relay Chat which allows discussion groups to interact synchronously between any sites on the network. Multi-User Domains (or MUDs) create complicated fictional spaces in which their interaction is situated. Thousands of private bulletin boards around the world provide space for thousands of other communities. The dramatic proliferation and growth of these communities has broad implications for how one thinks about the effects of technology on culture. Often one views television and computers as leading to a society increasingly involved with machines and decreasingly involved in community. However, these groups show that for an ever-growing number of people, the need for community has transformed working alone at a desk with only a computer as a companion into an excuse to spend time chatting away in vibrant communities of cyberspace neighbors.

University of Illinois
Urbana

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Appendix 1

Genres of Posts in the *All My Children* discussion group on rec.arts.tv.soaps

Genre	*Number of Posts*	*Proportion of Total*
Trivia	1	0.00
Discussion of Trivia	1	0.00
Unlurkings	2	0.01
Discussion of Unlurkings	5	0.01
Sightings	7	0.02
Discussion of Sightings	7	0.02
Spoilers	9	0.02
Discussion of Spoilers	23	0.06
Updates	12	0.03
Discussion of Updates	50	0.13
Tangents	30	0.08
New Threads	43	0.11
Discussion of New Threads	190	0.50
Total	380	1.00