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Ay Carumba!: The Simpsons. A Transnational Text to a Transnational Audience

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AY CARUMBA!: THE SIMPSONS. A TRANSNATIONAL TEXT TO A
TRANSNATIONAL AUDIENCE.

by

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Bachelor of Arts, De Montfort University Leicester, 2000

A Thesis

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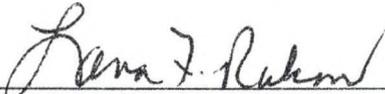
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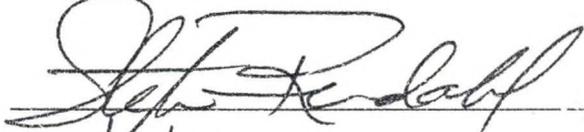
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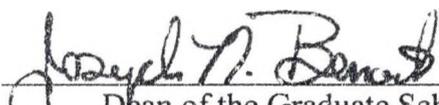
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the popular U.S. cartoon-sitcom <u>The Simpsons</u> and the vast global audience the show has reached in its 12 years on air. First, it clarifies the message the creator, Matt Groening, and the writers are conveying: a left wing American ideology. This message is sent to a variety of communities around the globe. To understand the relationship between the show as a media text and its audience, it needs to be studied in terms of transnational interpretive communities. Studying the audience as transnational, allows all communities, on a large and a small-scale, to be analyzed. By using the concept of interpretive communities to discover how several existing groups have interpreted the show, the paper then explores an established Internet community, alt.tv.simpsons. The newsgroup is compared and contrasted to the fundamentals of interpretive communities established earlier in the paper. The paper concludes by stating that when interpreting a media text, a transnational Internet community uses a hybridization process. Further discussion about the relatively new concept of online culture, and other Simpsons Internet groups in particular, is suggested for further research.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Matt Groening's cartoon, The Simpsons, started its life on The Tracy Ullman Show in 1987 as a series of crudely drawn thirty-second shorts. The current incarnation of the program was commissioned by The Twentieth Century Fox Network and launched in December of 1989. It was the first prime time cartoon since the sixties. The Simpsons at first was compared with animation like The Flintstones and The Jetsons, but soon the critics could find no clear comparison and the show was described as "truly original" (Rhodes, 1990, p.38). More than 12 years later The Simpsons has proved to be just as popular now as it was at its inception. It is set in Springfield "Anytown USA" and over time the five members of the Simpson family have helped Rupert Murdoch's Fox grow into one of the largest networks in America. While the show is very entertaining, and Groening himself has said he felt "entertainment was the key" (Angell, 1993, p.14), it also challenges the diverse social, political, sexual and aesthetic norms of American culture.

The Simpsons success does not stop in America; the fast paced ironic humor appeals to a worldwide audience and has now transcended physical time and space to find a global fan base in cyberspace. Academic scholars, media critics and worldwide fans have themselves dissected the message the writers and creators are attempting to send. However, in this thesis I am concerned with the audience itself -- how the fans have taken the show and given it their own interpretation and created their own communities around

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the show. In order to do this, I will need to explore the intent of the writers to some

extent, but the emphasis will be to understand this new breed of transnational audience

and what new interpretations it brings to the text. I will draw on literature about

interpretive communities, the ideas of transnational borders and global effect, and finally

analyze the audiences found on Internet fan sites.

In the second chapter I will introduce the show and attempt to explore what the

writers strive to convey through the text and images. The ideology of The Simpsons

stems back to the creator himself, Matt Groening, whose left-wing views were clearly

delineated in his work as a cartoonist with the Life in Hell rabbits he drew for many

years. The writers have subsequently kept up this tradition and attempt to challenge and

find fault with many American institutions. Anthony Giddens (1990) describes these

institutions as "expert systems" and suggests that as a society these are the things we put

our faith into without fully understanding how they work (p. 211). In The Simpsons,

these institutions include the medical system, education, religion and even television

itself. John Tomlinson (1999) suggests that when a show questions these systems it will

then become radical and political in the eyes of the viewer.

The Simpsons is broadcast to more than 60 countries. Defining community

borders has become a virtually impossible task with the advances in satellite technology.

To a broadcast satellite a human border is non-existent, meaning that many countries

receive programming freely. The Murdoch Empire controls a large percentage of

broadcast satellites worldwide, which makes it very easy to distribute its programs.

Rupert Murdoch himself is a transnational phenomenon holding multiple citizenships and

several passports. During the making of one episode, the show passes through six

counties before finally returning to the United States, meaning the creation process is also multi-national.

In chapter three, I examine what it means to be an audience member and look at how an audience interprets the show's text and imagery from within its own community setting. Stanley Fish (1980) showed how different communities interpret a text according to their common understanding. To reinforce this notion, Fry and Fry (1983) suggested "Texts are made meaningful through a process of audience signification" (p. 448). By analyzing The Simpsons from the perspective of different established communities we can get a sense of how the message is interpreted. I will look at established audience groups and how they have received the show. Another aspect explored in chapter three is "language" and the interpretation of signs. In chapter two, I discuss how The Simpsons has become transnational, and this will be taken one step further by examining how an audience can be transnational. This chapter will illustrate how it is possible to define our own borders and assess the audience within.

Taking a nation as a specific audience is one way of analyzing a community's reaction. It is beneficial to analyze a set of nations because it will also help establish why the show is popular in so many nations worldwide. I am limited to studying the reactions in the English-speaking world and to studying English literature about the experiences of non-English speaking nations. However, studying such countries as Canada, England, and Australia can shed some light on the effect at a national level. To analyze the effect I refer to Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, by Benedict Anderson (1991), which suggests that the three main aspects in the making of a community are language and religion, patriotism (often made up of patriotic symbols

such as the flag), and technology. Anderson also suggests that the notion of a community is imagined and that it is a human one.

Another way to distinguish an audience group is by its religion. I look at the Christian audience group to demonstrate how a community with a specific focus assesses the show's text and imagery. These analyses illustrate the existing research on interpretive communities identified at the start of the chapter.

At this juncture, I have established three important aspects of The Simpsons' audience: the intent of the writers and creators through the text and images, how an interpretive community will understand a message by drawing on their experiences, and how to look at The Simpsons from the perspective of a nation. With these points in mind I then assess the transnational fan base of the show.

Viewers of The Simpsons' include a wide range of interpretive communities, some of which interact in cyberspace. The Internet has given us a multi-user communication device which, unlike a two-way device (such as the telephone) or a one-way device (such as television), is a form of media that allows a group of individuals to interact. In the world of cyberspace there is an opportunity to build and develop many new communities. These groups are constructed primarily of dedicated fans. Their love of the show and desire to discuss it is the only reason this array of people comes together. That a nation is built on principles, finding unity in patriotism, language and technology has been argued in chapter three. The task is to see whether the basic principles that exist in real world interpretive communities are also apparent in cyberspace.

The Internet news group I used to explore the similarities to a real world interpretive community is alt.tv.simpsons. This group gets over one hundred messages a

day and was established shortly after Usenet came into being. The group is available to most Internet users and English is dominant, but not the sole language. The news group uses a bulletin board system known as threads, which means conversations can occur over several days. I examined a month's worth of data from the online archives, as this is a sufficient amount of time to get complete conversations. I then analyzed the newsgroup using existing research on Internet groups as a foundation. These included the works of Turkle (1996), Giese (1998), and Lull (1982).

The findings from the study of this Internet group show that it has a strong sense of community, which involves a hierarchical structure, dedication from members, and a sense of acceptance in the group. Although posting messages is a simple process, becoming a member is not an easy task in this news group. The sense of a community is clear. Even though there is considerable evidence to suggest that there are posters from more than ten countries, the American ideology portrayed in The Simpsons itself is still evident, that of a left-wing radical approach. In this newsgroup an individual member's nationality is, for the most part, irrelevant, but their knowledge about The Simpsons cannot be. A member's knowledge of U.S. culture, in which the show's characters live, is tested often in this community, and those who do not pass such tests are ostracized from the group.

There are many questions still unanswered in this thesis. For further research I suggest that other web sites be explored to determine if there is a possibility that a web community can survive without needing to assume a national culture. Perhaps in other cartoon sitcoms where the subject matter is less critical of U.S. culture there can be a milieu that doesn't demand such rigid structures. Exploring other cartoon sitcom texts

and communities, such as <u>King of the Hill</u>, or even Matt Groening's most recent creation <u>Futurama</u> would help to compare and contrast the rules found in alt.tv.simpsons, and to determine if these rules only apply to <u>The Simpsons</u> fan world. Further studies on <u>The Simpsons</u> and non-English speaking fan sites may help determine if the culture reflected in alt.tv.simpsons is due to the similarity in culture between English speaking countries.

This thesis gives good grounding for further transnational audience studies. It also establishes the various aspects needed to fully understand the process when looking at an interpretive community. In the conclusion I draw on literature about interpretive communities, the ideas of transnational borders and global effect, and analyze the transnational audiences found on Internet fan sites.

CHAPTER II

WHO ARE THE SIMPSONS?

Matt Groening, a well-established comic strip writer was challenged to create a series of short cartoons for The Tracy Ullman Show in 1987. He was widely recognized for his Life in Hell comic strip, which was perceived to have a left wing, sinister approach. In December of 1989, Twentieth Century Fox Network launched The Simpsons as a fully animated prime-time sitcom. No network had succeeded with a prime-time cartoon since the Flintstones in the 1960's (Rhodes, 1990, p. 38). The show has now been running for more than 12 years and remains popular in over 60 countries.

Although seemingly original in its ideas, different elements of the show could be compared to other successful TV shows and structures in society. The Flintstones and The Jetsons are two of the more obvious comparisons. Yet, conversely, the show is similar to that of other live-action sitcoms, such as Roseanne, and more importantly The Cosby Show. The Cosby Show was once the most successful sitcom on American television and it has a well-established ethos, promoting middle-class family values; it had saved the sitcom genre from collapse in the United States (Rosenkoetter, 1999; Jordan, 1995).

The Simpsons creators, Matt Groening in particular, followed very different social and narrative conventions than those of The Cosby Show. The characters in The Simpsons live in a recognizable setting that, although it doesn't exactly reproduce reality, does reproduce the dominant social view of our sense of reality. The Simpsons is an

anarchic animated cartoon that celebrates a dysfunctional family. It shows an ideology that is in direct contradiction with, and critical of The Cosby Show' s more conservative position (T. O'Sullivan, lecture Sept....ber, 1999). Since the birth of the show Fox and other networks have launched similar shows in the hope of following The Simpsons' success. Futurama, and more recently Malcolm in the Middle, have been sold to the English-speaking world as Simpsons-like programs. Malcolm in the Middle is directly based on The Simpsons and many similarities can be seen when looking at the individual characters (Martin, 2000; McDowell, 2000). In Brandweek, in an interview with the shows executive producer the similarities are stated.

> Malcolm's ties to The Simpsons extend far beyond the surface. The Simpsons takes a
> very bizarre cartoon world and makes it more emotionally real. Malcolm turns that
> equation on its head. The world is pretty normal, but emotionally things get a bit surreal.
> (Frutkin, 2000, p.54)

The fact that The Simpsons are YASPs (Yellow Anglo-Saxon Protestants) is hardly coincidental. The Simpsons was used to launch many of Murdoch's new channels worldwide, but mainly to help increase the popularity of his U.S. network, Fox. The characters on The Simpsons were designed to reflect potential U.S. Fox viewers.

It must be noted again that the show reflects Groening's ideology. Because the word ideology is itself a controversial notion, for the purpose of this paper it is provisionally defined as sets of ideals, beliefs, attitudes, language and rituals. As Kellner (1987) explains:

> I propose that we view ideology as a synthesis of concepts, images, theories, stories and
> myths that can take rational systematic form. (Kellner, 1987, np)

The Simpsons has a strong left-wing bent. When conservative causes are presented, they are done so in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. For example, in one episode a cash register freezes briefly, displaying the ironic message "NRA4EVER" (The Simpsons 138th Episode Spectacular, 1995, December 3, Fox). Several major figures and organizations in society have criticized The Simpsons. Joseph Pitts, a conservative Pennsylvania Republican, recently blamed Homer (the father in The Simpsons) and his ilk for contributing to the decline of fatherhood in America. One of the most noted critics was U.S. president George Bush senior, who lambasted The Simpsons in a speech to religious broadcasters and repeated this in his 1992 State of the Union Address, where he said that what was needed was a nation closer to The Waltons than The Simpsons. Groening had his characters respond to this attack two days later by saying "Hey, we're just like the Waltons. We're praying for an end to the depression too" (1992, January 30, Fox).

The Characters

At the center of the show is the Simpson family, who embrace a particular white ideological position. (Groening designed them in yellow so they would stand out when Americans are surfing the dozens of channels on their TV's.) All the debates and discourses that are placed between the characters serve to highlight this position. The support characters, like a Greek chorus, are again an embodiment of the cosmopolitan American culture and hierarchy of American society. The Simpsons hometown reflects the American class system that marginalizes and decides who can be successful on the basis of well-established conservative principles. Groening modeled the various Simpson family members on his own parents and his sisters (Olsen, 2000, para. 5).

Marge Simpson, (wife, gossiper, shopper, the more intelligent parent in the Simpson household) is devoted in all her roles. She is the "perfect model" of the housewife and can be compared to people such as Ma from The Waltons or Mrs. Cunningham from Happy Days. On the other hand she is a clever, inventive woman who has been an artist, police officer, leader of a boycott against TV violence and a pretzel franchisee. She has to think for the family, organize their lives and her own, and remarkably, she seldom cracks under pressure.

Lisa Simpson, (saxophone playing, highly intelligent elder daughter of the family) once summed up her ambitions and goals this way:

> Well, I'm going to be a famous jazz musician. I've got it all figured out. I'll be unappreciated in my own country, but my gutsy blues stylings will electrify the French. I'll avoid the horrors of drug abuse, but I do plan to have several torrid love affairs. And I may or may not die young, I haven't decided. (Moaning Lisa, 1990, February 11). Fox

Sadly it is obvious that this remarkably intelligent girl will eventually become her mother. This is the world The Simpsons live in, a male dominated world where the woman's place is in the home as wife and mother. Lisa has had many adventures and acts as the thought provoker for important issues during family crises in countless episodes.

Maggie Simpson, the baby who's name Homer can never remember, has a bright future. At the age of one she can already spell out $E=MC2$ with toy building blocks. She has led revolutions in search of her pacifier and already has an archenemy in the form of Gerald, the baby with one continuous eyebrow.

The Simpsons is trying to quietly subvert and yet use the traditional models of motherhood and other feminine archetypes common in American

sitcoms. The female characters are critiquing the role of women in the home and women's aspirations to a social position. The writers do this by examining Lisa and Marge's neglected and marginalized gifts and qualities, but always return these outstanding women to a subservient role. It is Homer-like buffoons who are at the center of events, or the attention is given to dysfunctional children like Bart. The females are strong characters who have been forced into traditional roles, satirizing previous American programming which has not included and embraced women in its power relations and social constructs.

Bart Simpson was included in Time magazine's "List of the top 100 key cultural and influential figures of the twentieth century," side by side with such outstanding people as Picasso, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Frank Sinatra, Bob Dylan and The Beatles (List of the top, 1999, para. 1). Bart was the main focus of the show originally; he is someone who is not interested in education and refuses to try it; he is intrinsically a failure who claims to be an underachiever and proud of it. It was this disobedient prankster who appealed to early audiences. His disregard for authority figures, questioning all things grown-up, and his general sense of fun was the show's original recipe. However, as the seasons passed, Homer has become the more popular character, giving an element of comedy that is key to the workings of the Simpson household.

Homer J. Simpson is the loveable buffoon and head of the Simpson household. He is a father to three, a husband, an employee of the nuclear power plant, and a friend to many unusual Springfielders. Homer is resigned to his unfulfilling job as a safety inspector in the comically unsafe power plant. He sees it as his stereotypical role in his

stereotypical family. Homer has broken away from his mundane life more than once,
spending time as an astronaut, a monorail conductor, university student and night
schoolteacher along with many other vocations. Yet, he always returns to his job and only
occasionally complains. Ed Bishop made this comment on the characters in the show:

> Homer and Marge will never get beyond their debts and the middle-class values they
> actually hate. Lisa will grow up and marry someone like her father, never opening up the
> poet inside her. Bart will likely die in a drag-racing accident. Yet, though there's angst
> and even self-pity in these characters, they are not defeated. Their awareness of their
> limitations and their struggle against them are a rare combination for television sit-coms.
> (Bishop, 1992, para. 3)

Bishop firmly believes and eloquently makes the point that The Simpsons is
revolutionary, mostly due to the struggle of the characters with their average lives
to which there will be no happy ending.

The Message

In addition to Matt Groening's input, the show's American broadcaster, the Fox
Television Network, shares responsibility for twisting the traditional narrative style. The
network is often thought to be aiming at the lowest common denominator in terms of the
country's viewers (to say nothing of the rest of Rupert Murdoch's empire, including its
UK broadcaster Sky One). The relatively new channel has had to broadcast conflicting
programs from the conservative and liberal perspectives so as to appear different and
original when competing with the other networks. John T. Caldwell (1995) describes this
marketing strategy as "counter-programming." In his book Televisuality: Styles, Crisis,
and Authority in American Television, he describes Fox's strategy of attack on the other
networks.

> Having successfully used The Simpsons to counter-program the nationally dominant
> Cosby Show in the late 1980s, Fox premised its entire 1993 – 1994 season on a
> systematic strategy of stylistic counter-programming against many of television's
> dominant shows such as America's Most Wanted against Roseanne, and In Living Color
> against Seinfeld. (Caldwell, 1995, p.123)

The creators felt that the impact and popularity of the program would not be as great if average Americans did not feel that it reflected their own lives (Cadwell, 1995). The fact that The Simpsons rivaled The Cosby Show also reflects people's perceptions of sit-coms' realism. The perfection of the Cosby family's lives was certainly envied by the American people who in some cases strived to be like that family, but what Fox wanted was to devise a show that gave a more realistic message about American life.

In chapter three's analysis of The Simpsons' appeal to audiences in other countries, it becomes clear that the show's global success is also due to this resonance of the characters' lives with the audiences'. The people of Springfield are faced with problems that are relevant to most societies and could be classified as universal. Therefore, the globalization of abstract systems creates opportunities for individuals, as well as crises in which they constantly have to remake their own lives and identities (Giddens, 1990, p. 112).

The issues on the show are typically global, but they are viewed from an American perspective. There is little doubt that other countries, when viewing the show, will interpret the messages differently. However, for an individual audience member, the more one's knowledge of Western popular culture grows, the more jokes and scenarios one is likely to understand.

Giddens (1990) states that there has to be a sense of trust in a modern society. He explains in his book, The Consequences of Modernity, about the prior knowledge a passenger would require in order to fulfill the task of getting on a plane.

> A large amount of "surrounding" knowledge is required to be able to get on the plane, and this is the knowledge that has been filtered back from expert systems to lay discourse and action. (Giddens, 1990, p. 112)

John Tomlinson (1999), in his book Globalization and Culture, explored this aspect of trust, stating that "we are only able to operate socially, to 'take things for granted' without apprehension about the most routine activity" (p. 57).

The surrounding knowledge an individual needs to exist in society is also culturally specific. Globalization and technology have created a new sense of trust in society. Historically, people put their trust in nature; they trusted the sun to rise and set without knowledge of how this occurred. Currently, people now trust social systems, such as medicine, without understanding why the systems are effective (Giddens, 1990, p. 25-27). The Simpsons not only requires its audiences to have this prior knowledge but also demands a high standard of esoteric knowledge in order to understand every concept in a show. The writers frequently challenge these expert systems in which we put our trust. To understand how a transnational audience receives these messages one must first understand the text and the intended message, and one can then look to interpretations by individual communities.

Why A Transnational Audience?

The term "transnational" was conceived to give more freedom when describing an area or market (Martin-Barbero, 1993, pp. 163-171). During the last century media and mass communication made defining a border increasingly problematic. Traditionally,

when a commercial enterprise crossed an established nation's border it became international. This is still true for many ventures. However, technology has made it more difficult to define those national borders. For example, satellite broadcasts cannot be restricted by physical borders. In addition, many communities today exist across borders, or outside of any borders at all. The term "transnational" addresses such issues; it allows you to set and define your own parameters, whether you are a small group or a large multi-national corporation (Sreberney-Mohammadi, Winseck, McKenna, & Boyd-Barrett, 1997; Hannerz, 1989, p. 212).

The proliferation of mass media in the last century has stimulated research on the effect of the messages sent to the mass audience. Broadcasting a show can often be mul.-national, international, or on a smaller local level, community specific. When studying a show such as The Simpsons, which can be viewed on each of these levels, it is important to define an audience in a transnational way. The term no longer simply pertains to commercial concerns, but can be a good way of studying the message and the reception of the message by the defined audience.

> Transnational communicative interactions are not limited to commercial concerns. Politics and actions by non-governmental organizations (NGO's) and governments alike are increasingly shaped by the use of communication technologies and a transnational flow of information. (Sreberney-Mohammadi, Winseck, McKenna, & Boyd-Barrett, 1997, p. xv)

One can therefore use the idea of transnational borders (self defined parameters between which information can flow) to define communities when analyzing The Simpsons' audience. This will be examined further in chapter three.

The making of the show is transnational in nature. The media empire created by Rupert Murdoch has quickly become one of the most powerful the modern world has seen. He was born in Australia and currently holds U.S., British and Australian citizenship, making him an international phenomenon. His media empire has expanded further than Fox, which broadcasts in the U.S. and Canada. (The Simpsons was a key factor in the growth of the network). Sky TV, launched in the early 90's has become the market leader in satellite home entertainment in the U.K. Sky is also leading the current market in the new generation of digital TV in the form of Sky Digital. Murdoch bought large shares of B-SKY-B in the mid-90s, giving him a large percentage of total broadcasting in the UK. Another branch of Sky, known as Foxtel in Australia and New Zealand, has made him the market leader in satellite communication in Oceania (T. O'Sullivan, lecture September, 1999).

Clearl   re is good reason that all programs produced by Fox be produced for a transnational market. It is easy to transfer shows within the existing Murdoch Empire; this is why such a diverse market has been exposed to The Simpsons. Therefore the Murdoch Empire has to be defined using transnational borders. Not only does the empire encompass whole nations, but it also has the capability to accommodate local scheduling in its network. Murdoch has satellite technology that broadcasts to a number of countries that have enacted laws that make viewing his programming illegal. Therefore there is an additional audience group in his empire, those who watch illegally.

The show's vast, diverse audience is not the only reason that The Simpsons can be classified as truly transnational. The animation for the original shorts (on The Tracy Ullman Show) were drawn and colored in the United States, mainly by Groening. When

the decision was made to make the show into a fully animated series, the animation was subcontracted to a company in Japan, which currently produces many of the Japanese cartoons airing in the United States, (e.g., Pokemon). As the popularity of Japanese cartoons increased so did the price, thus a new location was found in South Korea (Rhodes, 1990). The show has experienced a total of five major locality changes in animation, and is currently being drawn in the Philippines. Fans are able to spot the changes in animation, which have become less crude with each locality change. Completing an episode of The Simpsons is a process that takes four months, during which it is passed to six different countries before finally returning to the United States. Clearly, this is a transnational process.

Since societies were formed, exchanges of culture have occurred through wars, trade and migration. Today we recognize that through the advances in technology and media, globalization is enhanced and exposure to other ways of life is more common and less complex. The United States is the biggest exporter of television programming worldwide, and many studies have looked into the effect of the exposure to American culture through this medium on other communities. The Simpsons is one of the most successful transnational shows produced over the last decade and its impact thus far has been vast.

It has been established that The Simpsons is parodying American life, and the writers hope that U.S. citizens can empathize with this. The show has found a worldwide following in more than 60 countries. A question is then raised: if the American parody and ideology is a factor in the shows' success in the U.S., does this mean all other countries where The Simpsons has achieved high ratings have subsequently adopted a

similar culture? The idea that a country will change into the culture it is exposed to is a simplistic one, as will be discussed in chapter three.

There are many elements to take into consideration as a television program becomes transnational and defines its own borders. The creation of the show can be explained as transnational; however, the audience also has indefinable boundaries due to technological advances. Ulf Hannerz (1989) suggests in his book, Public Culture, that defining the community can be difficult but "at least as problematic is the sense that people make of the transnational culture flow" (p. 71). Although it is becoming progressively easier to broadcast outside of a nation's borders, thanks to advancements in satellite and digital communication and in the world of cyberspace, the meaning any audience member makes is becoming harder to interpret.

To fully comprehend the transnational audience's interpretation of The Simpsons one must first define the audience by establishing what community they belong to. There could be several communities for any one audience member, as it is a transnational show. However, exploring the audience as members of an interpretive community will help us develop an understanding of how the final interpretation is formed. We have touched on what Groening and the writers are trying to achieve; in the next chapter we will explore how some individual communities have interpreted the show as text.

CHAPTER III

TRANSNATIONAL INTERPRETIVE COMMUNITIES

The Simpsons is designed by Matt Groening, whose liberal view is demonstrable in his works, including the Life in Hell comic strip. The Simpsons is also influenced by its current writers and producers: the Fox network. Having establishing that The Simpsons is a transnational text, with the show seen in more than 60 countries, we will now explore the idea of interpretive communities, and examine what is involved in the interpretation of transnational communities.

When studying the interpretation of any media text it is important to understand the audience that is doing the interpreting. Generalizations about an audience are unacceptable when studying any aspect of the communication of a media message. No culture is made up of one isolated code. Even the most painstakingly defined rules of a community can be interpreted differently by individual members of the group. When looking at cultural codes within a society the basic categories of food, clothing, language, and objects are evident, but interpreting these categories is more complex (Uspensky et al., 1973). However, even when we refer to interpretation as a "flow of meaning," we must keep in mind the uncertainties built into the communicative process (Hannerz, 1989, p. 71). Therefore, when studying texts or messages, communication scholars often look at a specific interpretive community.

The audience for The Simpsons is vast, and hundreds of separate communities exist globally. Understanding the audience is important in many areas of communication,

broadcasting is one of the most researched. However, all communicators of media messages, no matter what form or how complex, must aim to get the desired message to fit into the common experience of the intended interpreters (Houson, Childers, & Heckler, 1987). Chapter two explored some of the motivation behind the writers and creators of the show, in particular Matt Groening. However, a writer who is attempting to convey a message to such a huge audience tries to make it fit it into the common experience of all viewers. This is an impossible task that leaves individual fans and the communities they belong to responsible for the interpretation of the message.

Interpretive Communities

Timothy Graeff (1997) researched interpretive communities from an advertising perspective. He proposes "a more subjective view... Within this view, consumers comprehend product information by inferring personal relevant meanings about product information" (p. 64). The research of Stanley Fish (1980) shows how an audience member interprets a given text. His work concluded that the meaning is found in the reader or receiver of the text. Fry and Fry (1983) suggested, "Texts are made meaningful through a process of audience signification" (p. 448).

However, Fish (1980) also noted that interpretive communities interact and find their own common realities and meanings that they then apply to the text. So it is not necessarily solely the individual's interpretation but rather a mix of the personal and socially imprinted conclusions that produce the final understanding. Glassie (1991) explained that although "personal relevant meanings" are important, there is a greater concept of the community as one united interpretive audience. "The collection is our key

expressive mode. Others make up the parts, but we make the whole" (Glassie, 1991, p. 264).

Fiske and Hartly (1978) suggested that television is simply an extension of language spoken within the community, which "is itself subject to many of the rules that have been shown to apply to language" (p. 16). It is commonly believed that communication can be primarily defined as text-based (Moriarty, 1996). However, when analyzing an audience's interpretation of media, this belief does not take into consideration the requirement for visual interpretation. The Simpsons is a cartoon and so the visual imagery involved is equally as important in viewing, and many messages are found in the drawings and not in the spoken words. Media in general is becoming more reliant on visual aids to convey a message; I will refer to these visual and aesthetic interpretations as signs.

Relationships between signs and their meanings are equally as important as those in written or spoken text (Anderson, 1993). A sign by definition is "something that is interpreted" (Eco, 1986, p. 15). Peirce (1991) explained that interpretation occurs when a word or image stands for (in the mind of the interpreter) something else, and that the process is difficult to analyze. If a researcher is not part of an interpretive community it becomes impossible to fully understand its interpretation of a sign or text. Peirce (1991) also believed strongly in social learning, offering this as an explanation to most social structures and beliefs (pp. 255-257). A researcher must either belong to the community or at least do sufficient historical research to understand the origin of its beliefs. As a researcher, I am also an audience member and fan of The Simpsons; this should not be ignored in any analysis but instead is required for a thorough analysis of any data.

Transnational Interpretation

Benedict Anderson (1991) explains in his book Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism that a community is entirely artificial. He explains that "imagined communities" are created of basic elements, language and religion, technology, and patriotism (Anderson, 1991, p3-7, 37-46). This not only pertains to large, formal groups such as nations, but to all communities, even those with no real sense of place such as those found on the Internet or a teleconferencing board of directors (Seton-Watson, 1977; Anderson, 1991). Each example can be defined as a community but each is very differently constructed.

When an exchange of information through media text and signs occurs from community to community, the borders of that community are not easily defined by such familiar terms as societies or nations. Instead of an international exchange of message (from one nation to another) or a societal exchange (from one society to another), the exchange is transnational, from one defined community to another. In The Simpsons, the exchange of information is transnational in many ways. It is programming that originates in the United States, but it is sent to many other nations. It is produced by Fox, which can be classified as a large corporate community, but which is made up of many smaller broadcasters and in some cases governmental distributors. Fox distributes the program to hundreds of U.S. affiliates, each of which holds its own community group. These are only some examples of how the exchange of programs such as The Simpsons is more correctly viewed as transnational.

Martin Shaw (1994) explains that there is a misconception about how audiences receive text that originates from a different culture. Such audiences do not simply copy the text.

> Global society should be understood not as a social system but as a field of social relations in which many specific systems have formed – some of them genuinely global, others incipiently so, and others still restricted to national or local contexts. (Shaw, 1994, p. 10)

There is a degree to which people's lives will be affected, but the new information will be integrated at a number of levels and at different rates. A researcher must ask many questions when studying a transnational exchange of media text, including whether the new or local community appreciates the culture portrayed in the imported media, and whether there is a real understanding of the language and symbols used (Worth, 1981). Intertextuality is one way of looking at a transnational text. It suggests a layering effect, where one interpretation is added to another to make up a new combined meaning (Merriam, 1975; Sherzer & Sherzer, 1979). Thomas (1991) gives three words that help categorize the effect of a transnational text's interpretation: assimilation, appropriation, and syncretism (p. 67).

Assimilation refers to the basic passing of a sign or text from one culture to another. In this case the sign or textual meaning is totally foreign to the receiving community and therefore the meaning is taken literally from the original culture. Often when a media message is given to a huge audience there will be small communities who have never been exposed to the culture portrayed within it and so will accept the given meaning as the final definition. Appropriation occurs when a sign that is familiar to one community is given to a new community that finds a new and different interpretation from the original. Finally syncretism is the integration of a sign, or a joint creation of a

new set of meanings. This is similar to the concept of hybridization, the combination of two or more elements to create a new mixture (Giddens, 1990).

A researcher who uses these categories to analyze a community's interpretation of a text or sign must bear in mind the following: The understanding of a text may not necessarily have a direct effect on a community and any media message may be disregarded as irrelevant to a particular community. Although many scholars have suggested that interpretation is a process of association with learned behavior, Schudson (1989) points out that retrievability does not mean incorporation (p. 98). In the case of The Simpsons this could mean a complete understanding of the text by a new community but a disregard for it because it is so far from its own culture.

A transnational audience is one where community boundaries are crossed. In the case of new media this becomes more apparent. The Internet has given us the ability to create a community in cyberspace. In cyberspace, communities exist without a sense of time or space (Giddens, 1990). It becomes impossible to place any boundary or border on the virtual place in cyberspace where the community meets. Mitchell (1995) emphasized this point about the new fundamentals of such communities by saying "The foundation ritual is not one of marking boundaries and making obeisance to the gods, but of allocating disk space and going online" (p. 211).

The Simpsons' fans have formed many Internet groups and sites on the web, which will be studied in chapter four. On the Internet, communities are made up of members from many nationalities and cultures. However, Anderson's (1991) fundamentals are usually still true, as these communities share language, technology (the means to get onto the Internet) and sentiment for a common topic, which fills the role of

patriotism. For example, members may come together to share their love for a show such as The Simpsons. Subsequently, signs from the show become as meaningful to the community as a flag is to a nation.

Transnational communities can be analyzed using the methods that would be applied to any other interpretive community. An understanding of how a community is formed can be gained by looking at the rules that define such a community. Then, once these points are established, a method such as Thomas' (1991) can be used to analyze any data.

<center>The Transnational Message</center>

The media message, transnational or otherwise, is what a community interprets. We will look at three larger audience groups and their responses to The Simpsons in order to prepare a more in-depth investigation in chapter four. These audience groups are the English-speaking world, the non-English speaking world, and a less-easily defined group, the Christian audience.

The series has been a big hit in English-language territories such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom, all countries where the Murdoch Empire has a broadcast presence. Britain's Sky Television, a Fox sister company, has shown the series since the network began broadcasting, and had exclusive rights to the show in the U.K. for some time. For many years in Britain it has been one of the top five shows on cable and satellite television as well as one of the top twenty on publicly broadcast TV (Swart, 1998, para. 12). James Baker, Sky's head of programming in the U.K. made this statement in a recent interview.

It took a while for audiences to realize it's incredibly good stuff. Right now it is our most
consistent show. It gets astonishing ratings week after week and hasn't been out of the
top five for four years. (Swart, 1999, p. 29)

As with several other U.S. series, Sky shares the show with the British Broadcasting Corporation, which has second-run rights. The BBC has recognized the popularity of the program by holding several events, the most recent in July 2000, dedicated a whole night of programming (4 hours) to facts and episodes of The Simpsons, Simpsons Night (2000, June 23). BBC2. This degree of attention to a syndicated program is almost unique in the history of the BBC.

Australia, on the other hand, has strict guidelines when it comes to public broadcasting. For example, advertisements during programs intended for pre-school children are not allowed (Key, 1999, para. 1-9). The censorship rates are very high and this has been reflected in many U.S. shows imported to Australia, including The Simpsons. Due to Australia's strict policies on television censorship, many scenes from The Simpsons have never been seen on Australian public broadcast television. For a long time three episodes from Season Six could were not shown at all on Australian public television, one of them containing the infamous death of Bleeding Gums Murphy (Lisa's saxophone playing idol). When Network Ten, an Australian public television station, purchased the rights to Season Six, these episodes were inexplicably not included in the package (although Foxtel, the Australian branch of Murdoch's empire, had no trouble acquiring them, along with the rest of Season Six) (Swart, 1999, para. 8). In March of 1998, when Network Ten finally showed these missing episodes, their advertisers claimed that they had not been shown earlier due to a nameless Hollywood distributor, not Australia's overly strict censorship guidelines.

Of course The Simpsons is actually intended for a mature audience, but because it

screens in prime time, younger viewers are also exposed to the show. The end result is a

larger fan base, counteracted by the imposition of censorship. (Censorship, 2000, para. 6)

In both Britain and Australia, The Simpsons has been a big hit and the show has a large

fan base. This is reflected in the web sites and fan conventions held in both countries.

Due to its many similarities, Canada offers even better opportunities to compare and

contrast an American and foreign audience group.

Canada could arguably be closest in culture to the United States, partly because of

its proximity, and The Simpsons' popularity is reflected in this. Again, it has achieved

some of the highest ratings for an American import and countless fan based Internet sites

reflect this popularity (Simpsons eh?, 2001, para. 14). The most recognized is that of

"The Proud to Be Canadian Web Group", which has won countless awards for its

Canadian Simpsons fan site. The editor of the site said, "For some odd reason we

Canadians get a kick out of hearing mention of our fair land on American TV" (Simpsons

eh?, 2001, para 2).

Many of the comments on the Canadian Web Group site refer directly to the text

of the show, especially where The Simpsons makes references to Canada. One of the

most popular features Bart shouting from the Statue of Liberty "Hey, immigrants! Beat

It! Country's full!" The boat captain responds "Okay, folks. You heard the lady. Back into

the hold. We'll try Canada" (The City of New York Vs. Homer Simpson, 1997,

September 21, Fox). Another shows Marge (in her brief stint as a substitute teacher)

complaining to Homer "It took the children 40 minutes to locate Canada on the map."

Homer responds, "Marge, anyone could miss Canada. All tucked away down there." (The

PTA disbands, 1995, April 16, Fox). Canada as a second-rate reflection of the United

States is one satirical subtext that seems to run through many episodes of the show. However, the interpretation given by the fans is very different. Due to the nature of The Simpsons, the fans on the "The Proud to Be Canadian Web Group" (2000) seem to regard the jokes as an acknowledgement of the attitudes held by the Americans. In that interpretation, the show is derogatory not towards Canadians, but to Americans who are portrayed as arrogant.

Not all Canadian critics are as enthusiastic as "The Proud to Be Canadian Web Group" fans when it comes to barbs directed against their country or against other nations outside of the United States. In Marjorie Ferguson's (2000) paper entitled "Invisible Divides: Communication and Identity in Canada and the U.S.," she looks at the significant differences between the two counties' culture and beliefs.

> The invisible divide between Canada and the U.S. span one of the longest and most
> porous electronic frontiers in the world. Nevertheless, the broadcasting environments of
> both nations offer contrasting policies and practices. (Ferguson, 2000, p. 49)

She accepts Benedict Anderson's idea that language can play a major role in the shaping of a community, but argues that there are many more underlying principles to take into consideration. Therefore, countries like Canada and the United States, which can appear very similar, have many fundamental differences.

> Such scales of demography and culture changes raise questions about the degree of
> congruence between culture, polity, and shared language as a prior condition of national
> identity, as well as questions about the extent of television or other media for own-
> language or minority cultures. (Ferguson, 2000, p. 54)

Ferguson is opposed to the way Fox, in particular, handles this fragile topic. She states "Fox TV is keeping up with its upstart fourth-network image, claiming path breaking leadership in minority programming" (p. 54). Referring specifically to The Simpsons, she

argues that this comical form of stereotype reinforcement can be as harmful as showing no Canadian reference at all. Many believe U.S. citizens already have an undereducated view of the Canadian way of life, and, according to Ferguson, making a point of this does not help solve the problem.

What is true for Canada is true for other countries. Despite the widespread popularity of The Simpsons in Australia, an episode where the Simpson family traveled to Australia aroused considerable uproar among Australians, who resented their country's portrayal as a home to backwards bumpkins and barbaric practices. No matter how ironically the writers may have originally intended the show to be, a great many Australians were offended. A great many were also amused (Bart vs. Australia, 1995, February 19, Fox).

When examining how Anderson's (1991) rules are applied to these different English-speaking audience groups, there is no unanimity. The first two requirements of language – in this case English – and technology – here represented by television and the ubiquitous Murdoch Empire – are clearly present. However, the third fundamental, that of patriotism, presents a disjunct. Within each audience group, the text of The Simpsons has been interpreted in both positive and negative ways, depending on the viewer's notion of patriotism.

Earlier, Thomas' (1991) three words that helped categorize the methods of interpretation for transnational texts were introduced. The international audience groups of The Simpsons are appropriating the text. Appropriation suggests that the interpretation a community gives a foreign text is different from the original intent or meaning. Since there are two distinct interpretations, one stating that The Simpsons is a positive message

for these audiences and the other stating it is not, the true meaning must have been changed in at least one of these interpretations. These differing views illustrate Fish's (1980) point that interpretive communities interact and find their own common realities and meanings that they then apply to the text.

The Non-English Speaking World

To contrast these findings we will now look at the non-English speaking world and analyze two countries where English is not the predominant language, Japan and India. The Simpsons has distinct advantages over other U.S. sitcoms; it is a cartoon and therefore can be translated into other languages without appearing as if it had been dubbed. Anderson (1993) explained that visual communication is equally as important as aural communication when analyzing a text as a whole. The images in The Simpsons are made more deliberate by their cartoon nature. Therefore, there are still parts of the message that may be foreign to some audience groups, even when the words are dubbed perfectly.

The show has had unique problems in each of the non-English speaking countries where it has been launched. In traditional Japanese culture, having fewer than five digits signals a lower-class status. Cartoons in western animation often have fewer digits; four is standard (McCloud, 1993). Thus, the four-fingered Simpsons were a tough-sell to glamour-ioving Japanese audiences. The animation was also a problem in that it was very different from Japanese animation and therefore was not as successful, although, paradoxically, the show was animated in Japan during its first series. Japan has a cartoon with very similar characters to The Simpsons; Crayon Shin Chan is Japan's version of

Bart Simpson (Napier, 2001). Clearly, it is the small semiotic elements that were a hurdle for The Simpsons in Japan, not resistance to the foreign ideological content.

India found Bart's disobedience and insolence a problem; it took Fox several attempts to successfully market the program. Eventually, it found that by concentrating on Lisa Simpson in its sales tactics, Fox could present a role model for children and the program was a success. Most episodes where Bart is the main character have never been shown as a result.

In both cases we see that cultural differences in these communities are magnified by the text and symbols within the show. Once again, the effect is one of appropriation as the receivers change the message to fit within their communities. For example, the four digits of the Simpson characters were interpreted in a Japanese context and in a way unforeseen by the American creators: the Simpson family was lower class because of the missing digit.

Anderson's (1991) fundamentals suggest that the greater the cultural difference that exists between the community from which a text originates and the community in which it is received, the further the interpretation will stray from the original intent. In other words, the less technology, language and patriotism two communities have in common the further the message may be from its initial meaning.

Christianity

Having looked at audiences defined by nationality and language, it is now time to look at an audience that defines itself by less rigid and arbitrary criteria. Few individuals choose their nationality or their native language, but they have much more flexibility in determining many of their other associations. Voluntary groupings, by profession or religion or interest, for example, form different types of communities then those already

studied, but they can be examined using the same methods. The reception given to The Simpsons by audience groups that define themselves as Christian is a useful example in the discussion of such groups. Before studying this audience, it will be instructive to examine the way Christianity is portrayed on The Simpsons.

The institution that is Christianity in America controls many businesses, schools, and media outlets; taken as a whole it is in one of the richest and most powerful forces in the country (Sillars, 1996). As such it receives the same attention that the writers of The Simpsons give to all other expert systems.

The most prominent Christian denomination on The Simpsons is represented by the First Church of Springfield, a middle-of-the-road Protestant church. This is faithful to the portrayal of the Simpsons as a typical white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant family. This is not the only genus of Christianity the Simpsons encounter, however. For example, the show often uses the image of the American TV evangelist, most notably in a episode in which Bart becomes an evangelical preacher, believing he has a gift from God (Faith off, 2000, January 16, Fox).

Ned Flanders is a regular character on the show and seems to represent a stereotypical image of the perfect American Christian. He has dedicated his life to the church and follows the bible to the letter. Over the course of the show, his wife has died and he is now a single father with two perfect children, seemingly holding no grudges or anger towards anything or anyone. This upstanding man is mocked by many of the people of Springfield, including the resident pastor at the First Church of Springfield, the Reverend Timothy Lovejoy, but his neighbor Homer despises him the most. On at least one occasion, when the show's creators wished to portray the physical incarnation of the

Devil, they used the form and voice of Flanders (Treehouse of Horror IV, 1993, October 28, Fox). By creating this blameless Christian, who is at the same time such an unpopular figure, the writers are making a statement about the institution of the Church (Bowler, 1996; Sillars 1996). Whether this message should be interpreted positively or negatively is a subject of some debate.

As Les Sillars (1996) explains in "The last Christian TV family in America," The Simpsons is the only prime time show on American TV that features a primary character with such an explicitly Christian moral and ethical foundation.

> What do we know about the spiritual life of *Roseanne* or *Frasier*? Are the doctors on *ER*
> or *Chicago Hope* ever moved to pray or consider God? Religion's invisibility in prime-
> time programming speaks volumes about how the entertainment industry views its place
> on the scale of human activity and until that changes we may have to make do with Ned
> Flanders as our televised spiritual mentor. (p. 12)

Depending in part on their religious perspective, different communities are divided on whether Ned Flanders' character is a positive or negative one. Gerry Bowler (1996) observed many Christian and atheist groups on the web. The newsgroup alt.religion agreed strongly that the image of Christianity portrayed on The Simpsons was very negative and the effect on audiences could be detrimental. On the other hand, the newsgroup soc.atheism found the show to be overly favorable towards religion, one participant claiming, "the Simpsons is becoming more of a Sunday school program than ever. The central message of that show, I've noticed, is that the only good people are religious and that those who are not are immoral" (Bowler, 1996, ¶ 55).

The Simpsons' stereotypical Christian portrayal of church life raises feminist concerns as well. The women of the church have very specific roles, such as Helen

Lovejoy, the gossipy wife of the reverend, and Maude Flanders, who went away to church camp to learn to be less judgmental. Marge is also normally defined by the traditional expectations of the Christian wife. She is a stay at home mom who obeys her husband and bakes for church events. Groups of scholars who study feminist hermeneutics have used Fish's (1980) work with interpretive communities to examine Christian roles in the church and feminist interpretations of the Bible (McClintock Fulkerson, 1998; Saye, 1996). They agree that such stereotypes can be harmful in the fight to change the image of women's roles in the church.

It is important to emphasize that any Christian stereotyping is based on both the writers' and network's ideas, and they often do not agree. Fox criticized its own writers when The Simpsons used the Catholic Church in its parody of Super Bowl commercials during an episode that ran immediately after the Super Bowl (Sunday, Cruddy Sunday, 1999, January 21, Fox). Mike Scully, the show's executive producer, said in an interview that aired the same month that he was told by a Fox executive to get rid of the reference to Catholicism (Rosenberg, 1999, para. 19). He said Fox wants Catholics treated differently from other religious faiths and not designated as punch lines by the show's writers. Scully went on to say "People can say hurtful things to each other about their weight, their race, their intelligence, their sexual preference, and that all seems up for grabs, but when you get into religion, some people get very nervous" (Rosenberg, 1999, para. 12).

There are certainly mixed interpretations of whether or not The Simpsons portrayal of religious life is good or bad. Jeff Shalda (2000) believes that the mere presence of such strong Christian ideals in a popular program is positive.

...they are not only able to offer up hilarious criticisms of religion in America, but they are also able to give incredible insights into spiritual areas that are very crucial to many viewers. (Shalda, 2000, para.1)

The show has demonstrated that Springfield possesses a rich religious life and that it takes religion's place in society seriously enough to give it a permanent slot on the show.

The analysis of Christian audience groups is more complex than the analysis of national audience groups. These groups may have very little else in common, but most members would say that their religious convictions are a major part of their lives. As Les Sillars (1996) stated, the Christian influence in a television program is a new concept to American audiences. As Fox's experience has demonstrated, religion is a very difficult subject to approach, especially for American audiences. Fry and Fry (1983) said interpretation is a process involving audience signification. When these signs have a religious context, they can be especially volatile. This is in part due to the fact the religion as it is presented on The Simpsons is of a variety familiar to most Americans, and therefore resonates more strongly with them than with audiences from other countries.

There is evidence of both assimilation and appropriation in the interpretation of the Christian message in The Simpsons. When a community, such as the alt.religion newsgroup previously mentioned, takes the stereotypes literally and reacts to them that way, it is assimilating the text. When the soc.atheism community takes the same text, analyzes it, and concludes that it presents a positive message about Christianity, it is appropriating.

Community analysis has proved fruitful when examining how different audiences interpret The Simpsons. Anderson (1991) provides the fundamentals that are needed to

understand how a community defines itself. Using Thomas' (1991) levels of interpretation, the different ways that a transnational community interprets non-indigenous text become apparent. By analyzing three different classifications of audiences – non-English speaking, English speaking, and Christian – we have already seen how some groups have reacted to the show. Will a transnational community that has been created from the fan base have the same interpretations as other communities? The next chapter examines a diverse transnational community based on the Internet, which has been created by fans who wish to discuss The Simpsons.

CHAPTER IV

CYBERSPACE COMMUNITIES

Thus far, beginning with chapter two, we have explored the history of The Simpsons, the creator and writers' motivations, and defined the show as transnational. It has been established that in order to have an understanding of an audience's interpretation of the message one must look at an audience as an interpretive community. The show's vast transnational audience can be divided up into various self-defined communities. In exploring communities defined by nationality, language, and religion, we have seen how different groups interpret the same message to fit within their diverse community settings. This brings us to the extended fan based world of The Simpsons.

Viewers of The Simpsons have created an extended fan-based world that is made up of many media within a larger fan universe. These range from news letters and comics created by the fans themselves to a variety of cyberspace outlets such as bulletin boards, chat rooms and fan web sites. Every year, there are Simpsons conventions worldwide where a mix of fans from different races and cultures share their love for the show. Abercrombie (1997), in his book Television and Society, describes the confluence of fans of a worldwide program such as The Simpsons as follows:

> Fans will meet with others on line to view the series concerned, to attend meetings and
> full-scale conventions, and, above all, to engage with the medium in a variety of ways.
> (Abercrombie, 1997, p. 163)

This meeting of viewers is a daily occurrence in cyberspace where there are fewer restrictions in place as far as time and space. Cyberspace is a forum where fans can talk to, quiz, and question other people to determine how intense their passions for the program are (Harrington & Bielby, 1995 p. 68).

Studying an Internet community can be problematic because there is a range of cultures and nationalities in a non-time and space specific setting. A group on the Internet is truly transnational in nature. However, it is still a community in its own right and therefore should be studied as an interpretive community. It is vital to any successful research in this area to understand that "the collection is our key expressive mode. Others make up the parts, but we make the whole" (Glassie, 1991, p. 264). The researcher's knowledge or participation will also become increasingly important in understanding the interpretations of this community.

Peirce (1991) argued that the process of interpretation is made more difficult if the researcher does not belong to the community. Therefore, in this chapter I will evaluate a group that I have been a part of for several years, alt.tv.simpsons. I will evaluate the group as an interpretive community, first by establishing what it means to be an interpretive community, and then using a process of textual analysis to assess the group's interpretation of the show.

No Time or Place

Thus far we have explored communities in the real world. When in cyberspace one's computer is a gateway to a world of information that allows one to transcend the real world limitations of time and space (Markley, 1996). The Internet provides an opportunity to create communities and these new communities are, by their nature,

selective about their membership and the topics they discuss. One recurring topic is the foundation of the community, which can be a popular show like The Simpsons. This is, to an extent, a reflection of real world communities where people come together when they have common interests. It is the lack of a defined time and space in cyberspace that allows the community to span the world, finding fans from disparate backgrounds who would previously never have come together (Stone, 1991; Bailey, 1996; Carey, 1998).

Humanity's perceptions of both time and space are continually modified by technological and social advances (Webster, 1994; Nakamura, 2000; Jacson, 2001). It is hard to define what we mean by real time and space. In his book The Consequences of Modernity, Giddens (1990) states that inventions in history, starting with the sundial and later the watch, have allowed us to measure the time of day. This has made us less reliant on nature, and the sun in particular. Greenwich Mean Time has been the accepted standard of time since the nineteenth century. However, calendars may vary from one culture to another; the Western world may date events based on the birth of Christ, but many other cultures use calendars that date from different historic events. This is one reason why the established norms are only established in a single community and may vary greatly from one to another.

Modernity shows us that the definitions we are comfortable with are questioned when new technologies are launched. The question how far is it to London from New York would have once been answered by the weeks it would have taken to make the trip by boat. However, now the answer could be justified as hours by plane or seconds by e-mail. Martin Wolf (2001) addresses this issue in his paper "Will the Nation-State Survive Globalization?"

Over the past five centuries, technological change has progressively reduced the barriers to international integration. Transatlantic communication, for example, has evolved from sail power to steam, to the telegraph, the telephone, commercial aircraft, and now to the Internet. (Wolf, 2001, p. 178)

Clearly, because the rules of time and space are constantly changing our world, and because they are different for each community, time and space cannot be easily defined.

The Simpsons itself also has no real sense of time or space. For example, although the show debuted in 1989 featuring a 10-year-old Bart, an eight-year-old Lisa and an infant Maggie, 12 years later, Bart is still in the fourth grade, Lisa is still in second grade, and Maggie has yet to learn to walk. This timelessness would not be possible if The Simpsons was a live-action show. Springfield, although it has no physical existence, is readily identifiable as Anytown, U.S.A. It is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere in America. The Simpsons' definition of time and space, although untraditional, has remained consistent for 12 years and is easily followed by viewers from all corners of the globe.

To keep a sense of reality the viewer of The Simpsons often witnesses projections of the future and past, which then establishes that there has been a degree of thought put into each of the family member's total life. However, there is a definite sense of time when looking at the issues explored over the show's 12 year history. The show has been current with technological, social and political developments throughout the world. Often the show's content will reflect the popular issues in world and local news, or be centered on a popular topical issue of the time.

Not having a defined time and space gives the show a larger universal

appeal, as it can be easily adapted to fit into a community's idea of time and

space. Having the updated view of larger worldly issues gives the show appeal as

a modern entity. The balance of these two factors contributes to the shows success

transnationally. The Simpsons is an animated program, and while the characters

have not changed physically they have embodied the changes that have taken

place in society over the course of the show.

Internet Communities

Unlike other media such as television, which is a one-way communication

process, or the telephone, which allows for a two-way exchange, cyberspace allows

multiple users to interact and thereby form a community (Giese, 1998). A common

Internet term for these users is "cyborgs." This term is applicable to a person's Internet

persona, whether that persona is real or make-believe. Cyborg is an abbreviation for

cybernetic organism and the concept has been a reality since the first implanted

pacemakers and prosthetic limbs (Hayles, 1993).

Two studies of cyberspace and communities on the web, "Constructing a virtual

geography: narratives of space in a text-based environment" (Giese, 1998) and "Identity

in the age of the Internet" (Turkle, 1996) form similar conclusions about communities

online. Giese looks at a web group called Cyberpunks and Turkle is concerned with two

MUD's (Multi-User Dungeons) LambdaMOO and TrekMUSE. Web groups are usually

created when there is a common interest and people want to develop a community around

it. In the case of Cyberpunks this interest was in storytelling, and all users are a part of an

ongoing story about a ranch. MUD's, on the other hand, are fantasy games where players

take on a new role or create a character with which to play. LambdaMOO is based on the real world and TrekMUSE on the Star Trek universe.

The two studies concluded that the communities on the Internet are direct reflections of real world communities. One of Benedict Anderson's (1991) fundamentals, that a community is dependent on the technology that is available to it, is clearly present. As all members of an Internet group require basic computer equipment to access cyberspace, this is something they have in common.

Another common trait that the Internet community seems to share with our reality is that of acceptance. Joining a web group is simple in practical terms, but belonging to such a community is not as easy. In the Cyberpunk world a new member would only be accepted if they could display full knowledge of the history of the community and use the adapted language appropriately. This requirement suggests a tightly knit group of people who feel a sense of another of Anderson's (1991) principles of community, a sense of patriotism. This is the idea that a group creates symbols and signs that are meaningful to those in the community, and creates rules for acceptance into their structure.

Anderson (1991) suggests language is also one of the primary characteristics in defining a community, and, in most cases, it is personalized to prevent outsiders from penetrating borders and joining easily. Numerous examples of this can be found in real world communities. Regions of England have their own unique words or phrases that identify the user as a member of that community. Similarly, nations such as the U.S. and Australia have adapted the English language over time and created their own dictionaries. On the web this adaptation is especially visible in the proliferation of abbreviations of the English language, such as LOL (laugh out loud) or FAQ (frequently asked questions). To

personalize a language for an individual community, members will make these

abbreviations topic specific. If one is unfamiliar with the code, communication becomes

impossible. This process is apparent in the studies of Turkel (1996) and Giese (1998)

who reported that in the cyber communities they studied many abbreviations and slang

terms had been formed in order to keep intruders out.

Lurkers are people who can access the community but choose not to participate in

the group. Giese (1998) found that often individuals had to spend many months lurking

and observing before they could be accepted into the community. Giese and Turkle

(1996) both found that an individual with an academic address was always going to

encounter more resistance than one with a universal addresses like Yahoo and Hotmail.

Researchers have done many studies on these groups in recent years and the communities

are aware of these studies. Consequently, they show hostility to academic visitors

because it is assumed they do not truly want to be a regular member of the community.

Turkle (1996) observed the bonding and maintenance of relationships between

community members, another reflection of real communities. Although most members of

MUD's are playing fictional characters it is possible to become attached to others in the

group. Activities such as weddings and Internet sex are common on these types of sites.

Although very few of these sites adopt a real sense of time and space, and despite the fact

that the Internet itself still is a fairly new medium, relationships have developed over

time. Both Turkle (1996) and Giese (1998) observed friendships that had been

established for many years.

Both studies found that the communities possessed hierarchical systems. Giese

(1998) found that to be accepted in the Cyberpunk world he would have to face and

impress the leaders of the group. Turkle (1996) also found that when things in the world of cyberspace go wrong, authority figures are in place to step in and take control like the police do in the real world. The authority of these individuals is accepted by all in the community, and they are looked up to by many members.

James Lull (1982), in an attempt to understand the process of consumed meaning and social interaction, categorized the relationships with different media forms and within media created community into four headings. The first is dominance, which refers to the enhancement and reinforcement of social positions, such as leadership in these groups. Both Turkle (1996) and Giese (1998) found a hierarchical system in the communities they studied. The second heading is relational, when a community discusses media because it is something each member has in common. The third heading, avoidance, refers to the desire to avoid physical and verbal contact with others, a feature than can be found in these cyberspace communities. A group that exists only in cyberspace can also decrease social tensions because there are no aesthetics, and therefore race and gender can be irradiated or changed. Lull's final category, social learning, refers to the processes involved in socialization. These categories, along with those of Anderson (1991) and Thomas (1991) form the basis for my analysis of communities devoted to The Simpsons.

Method - alt.tv.simpsons

Usenet orders different newsgroups into a clearly defined system of nested classification. The initial categorization of groups is by general abbreviation. Rec. (recreation) and alt. (alternative) are the two most popular categories for fan newsgroups, but there are other more specific groupings such as bio. (medical) and comp. (computers). The alt. and rec. headings are also thematically close to each other within the Usenet

structure, and each contains groups that cross-reference each other with relevant links that provide quick access to similar newsgroups. The alt. groups are often the most popular newsgroups for television program interests. These have been subcategorized as alt.tv. Alt.tv is program specific for hundreds of popular television programs (Giese, 1998; Rheongold, 1993).

People post messages on alt.tv.simpsons each day. These "postings" are organized into a system known as threads. A question or comment is made and other members respond, forming a conversational thread (Giese, 1998; Rheongold, 1993). This specific newsgroup is known to be more fanatic then most others, and many members take their comments very seriously. An archive of conversations from different newsgroups dating back to 1995 can be found at http://groups.google.com/. It is important to capture a full conversation when analyzing a thread. Because conversations can last for several days, if not weeks, this study analyzed all the postings from the month of July 2001.

Peirce (1991) suggested that to fully understand the interpretation of a community you must belong to it and be a part of that interpretation. I have been a member of alt.tv.simpsons for two years and have joined in on many conversational threads. For the purpose of this analysis I did not contribute to any of the conversational threads in the month of July 2001. However, my familiarity with the group and the prior experiences I had had participating in this community aided me in my textual analysis.

When examining alt.tv.simpsons the results will initially be compared to the findings of Turkle (1996) and Giese (1998) and then subject to the following forms of analysis: Anderson's (1991) three principles of imagined communities, patriotism,

language and religion, and technology will be explored; because this is a transnational newsgroup (as all Usenet newsgroups are) I will refer back to Thomas (1991), who gave three words that helped categorize the different ways a transnational text could be interpreted – assimilation, appropriation, and syncretism; finally, I will also compare the results to the four categories Lull (1982) used to define the phenomena of media formed communities, dominance, relational, avoidance and social learning.

Results

In the month of July 2001, 3813 messages were recorded in alt.tv.simpsons from 224 different users. Many of the users were one-time posters either starting a conversational thread or joining a pre-existing one. There were 13 members of the community who played a large role in the month of July. Each of these members contributed several times a day and joined in on all of the popular conversations.

Posters on alt.tv.simpsons claim to be from many different countries. (Obviously, the anonymous nature of the newsgroup means that any demographic data cannot be independently confirmed. For my study, I relied on veracity of the posters.) There are many direct references to the countries the individual members are from. Here is one from an Australian member.

(First Poster) - Being from AUSTRALIA, when Bart made the hundred dollar fone call to a shep shereing sehd, l cant remember what the title :-(, and the WHOLE episode was based "down-under" l actually have to laugh, cause it was like it was based in England or U.K....

NOT and pisode like that would have happended in OZ!

The ONLY thing AUSSIE was the sheep, koala, and the outback.

ANY COMMENTS FROM THE YANKS ????

The Rack - Nothing yet from Mariano Rivera, Chuck Noblock , or El Duque

A majority of posters are from English speaking countries, Canada, the U.S., Britain and Australia in particular. However there are others whose first language is not English, including members from France, Norway and India.

When reading the archives, I realized that a researcher would normally have difficulty understanding the language of this particular community. However, my experience as a fan and community member aided me in this part of my analysis. There are many abbreviations and coded words frequently used on this newsgroup. Often individual episodes were spoken about in code, partially to test a reader's knowledge and also to shorten responses. In one thread about the quality of old episodes and how the quality will last forever, a member wrote:

> Unless they'll be crushed by an army of flat "show me your boobs" episodes.
>
> Yep. Also the Homer^3 segment from THOH with all the formulas in the
>
> background.

The first sentence refers to a recent discussion about an episode from the eleventh series that was not as popular with the group as earlier episodes. This discussion had taken place several days before this response. This is an example of how, to be fully aware of the meanings of a thread, one must not only have a great knowledge of the show itself, but also knowledge of past discussion among the members. The second sentence gives an example of abbreviation and codes. The THOH (Tree House of Horror, episodes made for Halloween) episode in question is one involving Homer as a computer animated cartoon, or three-dimensional character. THOH is a common abbreviation, but several other recurring examples exist. Once one is familiar with the way members post their responses, and the

language adopted for this newsgroup, it is then possible to analyze the text and subtext.

The hierarchical system mentioned by both Turkle (1996) and Giese (1998) is firmly in place in the alt.tv.simpsons community. Out of the 13 strong community members mentioned earlier, there are two members who seem to have the greatest authority on the newsgroup, Internet King and The Rack. The Rack posted a total of 384 messages and responses and Internet King posted 124 during July 2001. Although they are not the only leaders, they often work together to become a stronger presence on the newsgroup. During one conversation it became clear that these two have been members of the community for a substantial amount of time.

> **(First poster)** A year ago, this place was filled with the likes of Dean Humphries, Wave King,
>
> Drew Levine, Chris Palm and the always outrageous (and fellow DINS) Kieran
>
> Murphy. Then I went away to college, and now they're all gone. I'm miss Seth
>
> Miller at this point. What happened to these guys?
>
> **Internet King**. Regulars come and go.
>
> Heck, I remember regulars from the mid-90's who aren't here anymore.
>
> Some leave usenet, others die, others get lives. ;)
>
> TTYL
>
> **(Second poster)** Goodness! I had no idea! For you see, I have been on Mars for the past
>
> decade, in a cave, with my eyes shut, and my fingers in my ears.
>
> **The Rack**.. And I've been trying so hard to keep the Martians under wraps. And control the
>
> British crown. And keep the metric system down etc etc.
>
> You all get the joke.
>
> **Internet King**. A simple proposition: How would you like to make a dollar? All you
>
> have to do is sign a paper that says I can get your life. I need to

get a life - any life. YOURS! :-)

The Rack. I'm now feeling like a considerable loser, for I have been in this newsgroup since 1996, never leaving.

The Rack and Internet King are not only leaders because of their long membership in the alt.tv.simpsons newsgroup but also because of their superior knowledge of The Simpsons. They are able to introduce intricate details about the show into many conversations. Other fans rarely question their knowledge and often go to them for help with Simpsons trivia.

When a message is archived the time and date are recorded (Google uses Pacific Standard Time). In a given day, some members read and post to the newsgroup for a considerable amount of time. Internet King can be traced on the 16th to have been active from 10:56am to 11:30am. In this relatively short period of time, he submitted 16 messages. On the same day, The Rack posted 37 times between 2:55pm and 10:01pm. Giving this much time and energy to any community shows a high level of commitment, and one's position in a group is usually a reflection of the level of commitment.

There is a concerted attempt by established members and leaders to keep all conversations directly related to The Simpsons. On several occasions over the month, conversations wandered onto other topics and the comments by leaders or well-known members put a stop to such threads or related them back to a Simpsons' theme. In this thread a message thought to be "cross posted" (posted to numerous newsgroups because the author thought the subject was relevant to each of them) has been posted and many members are not pleased that the message has little to do with The Simpsons.

The Rack. hmmm first let me say CROSS-POSTING PISSES ME OFF

2ndly, where does it say "this is about The Simpsons" in that stuff you put

on here?

(Second Poster) Um... ? The subject line is a quote from episode 1F17. I'm sure Hank

just wants to show an example of "Life imitates The Simpsons". It is about

The Simpsons, if not *directly*. I don't see any other groups in the list,

either... probably not a cross-post.

The Rack. What the hell does this have to do with anything? Homer stole some sugar

once, does that mean I can post the Stock quotes to C&H Sugar every day.

Maybe there is some deeper meaning, and everyone has a deep seeded

relationship with sugar that I have yet to experience.

The Rack, an acknowledged leader of the community, has taken it upon himself to police

the newsgroup. He is not satisfied when the second fan's attempts to relate the offending

message to the show. This is the same behavior that Giese (1998) and Turkle (1996)

found in their studies. Postings that are totally irrelevant to The Simpsons are not

tolerated. This is an example of Lull's (1982) relational category, which states that the

commonality members share, in this case The Simpsons, is a fundamental foundation that

not only brought the people together but also continually sustains them.

> A cultural community is one that shares a common mode of reception, a common set of
> critical categories and practices, a tradition of aesthetic production and a set of social
> norms and expectations. (Jenkins, 1992, p. 85)

Without The Simpsons the alt.tv.simpsons community would not exist. There are strong

relationships in this community, which may be able to survive outside the topic, but

members want to maintain this commonality, so new members will be ones who share the

same interest.

Giese (1998) found that acceptance into the alt.cyberpunks group required an in-depth understanding of the newsgroup, the history and the hierarchy. The alt.tv.simpsons newsgroup is no different. Many new members post messages, but if they do so without displaying a good understanding of how the community works they are often ignored or ridiculed by senior members. There are some that are successful in joining the community. The example below shows how, by interacting with the leaders in an appropriate fashion, it is possible to be accepted after one's first posting.

> **(New Poster)** I love The Simpsons! It's one of my all-time favorite shows, second only to Wings. Homer, Mr Burns, and Chief Wiggum are the best characters, IMHO, but I love almost everybody. I think the quality of the show has declined slightly the past couple of seasons, but I can always find something in every episode that makes me laugh.
>
> **The Rack.** [flips channel] "Wings". [flips channel] "Wings". [flips channel] "Wings rerun." [flips channel] "Making of Wings".
>
> Aw jeez there; they got me living with an African-American, a Semite-American and a Woman-American there... And... I'm GLAD. I love youse ALL! I love everybody! (<<-- the quote connection)
>
> PS: Hi. Welcome!
>
> PS: I am gay (not a guarantee)
>
> **(New Poster)** LOL! I wish ;0) Same with The Simpsons too.
>
> Thanks for the welcome.
>
> **The Rack.** I *like* being thanked.
>
> Thank YOU for the friendly "thank you".
>
> **The Internet King.** Wings! Oh dear lord!
>
> Sincerely,
>
> Little Girl

First, the new member showed knowledge of recent conversations. The decline of the show is a hotly debated topic on this site. However, The Rack was not going to give this person an easy entry into the newsgroup. He responds by making fun of her love of Wings, but the new member does not take offense and responds with a LOL (laugh out loud) and thanks him for the welcome. After The Rack's acceptance, others subsequently post to welcome the new member. Depending upon what a person chooses to reveal about themselves, they are less vulnerable to personal prejudice in an online community. Aesthetics are not a problem when you are just text on the monitor, so one cannot tell if you are of a specific race or gender. However your knowledge of the show and history of the newsgroup become a point of ridicule if you are unprepared.

Discussion

Alt.tv.simpsons is a transnational community with borders that are difficult to delineate due to the indefinable nature of time and space in cyberspace. There is evidence to suggest that members come from many countries and nations, however they are all expected to understand the irreverent take on American culture in The Simpsons. In alt.tv.simpsons an individual member's nationality is irrelevant, but knowledge about The Simpsons culture and nationality cannot be if that member is to belong to the community. So there is a sense of nation to the group, but that sense is borrowed from the fictional town of Springfield in America and does not originate in the group. The media messages in The Simpsons are the basis for the existence of this community and so, before we examine the structure, we must look at how that message is interpreted.

Thomas' (1991) three categories that help describe the interpretation of a message from one community to another are assimilation, appropriation and syncretism. In chapter

two we looked at Matt Groening, the original source of the text, and the show's writers, producers, and network. We also explored the American audience the show was originally intended for. However, when the message is passed onto other nations the interpretation may be very different from the originally intended message. In the case of alt.tv.simpsons one might expect that the devoted fans of the show would take the text literally without changing its sacred message. This would imply a simple assimilation process, where the message remains unchanged. Once I have explored the fundamentals of this transnational community I will evaluate this more closely.

The alt.tv.simpsons newsgroup is host to an intricate community, which, as in the real world, has developed a complex structure of its own. Anderson's (1991) three fundamental rules of an imagined community are evident in the group. In any community a community language is both a means of communication and a way of keeping the community exclusive. The way that the alt.tv.simpsons group communicates is unique to itself. The group uses its own abbreviations and creates new words, in part to exclude nonmembers from the group.

All cyberspace communities exist on the Internet. So, as with all such communities, technology is required both to view the show and to access alt.tv.simpsons. This accords with another of Anderson's (1991) rules, that technology is key to any community A third requirement, patriotism, or the need to make symbols and signs sacred is also an important part of this group. The community regards all popular Simpsons' quotations as sacred, ranging from the popular "D'oh" used by Homer, to lengthier excerpts like the original songs from the episodes. As Fish (1980) explains, a subject, in this case The Simpsons, is the one thing all members have in common in such

communities; it is the foundation for this community, and that is why it then becomes sacred to each member. All of Anderson's fundamentals for a real world community seem to exist in this cyberspace community as well.

James Lull (1982), in his work with consumed media and social interaction, also observed that in real world communities there is a common subject that brings the group together. He categorized this rule as "relational" (p. 399). This is certainly true for the transnational community of alt.tv.simpsons. There must be a common interest among the members if the community is to exist in cyberspace. The other three rules found in Lull's (1982) research are also evident in this community.

The hierarchical system I observed complies with Lull's (1982) dominance category. He found that when analyzing a community's interpretation of any text, a dominance structure becomes apparent. He suggested that many of the opinions and understandings of an interpretive community are often filtered through a hierarchy in which the leaders greatly influence the overall belief. Not only are there accepted leaders in the alt.tv.simpsons community, but there are also members who can be classified as newcomer or established member. This reflects a social structure formed in real world communities. Real world communities create leadership positions in order to regulate and enforce rules that the community lives by. In the case of alt.tv.simpsons the leaders are also there to protect borders from outsiders and decide who can be admitted into the community structure. They are also the authority on trivia and Simpson facts; consequently leaders help fulfill the need for patriotism outlined by Anderson (1991), as they help to keep the show's text sacred.

Another of Lull's (1982) categories is avoidance, specifically the avoidance of physical and verbal contact with others. His research was on the media's relationship with communities and the effect it has on communities. In this case the media produced The Simpsons but the setting of this community is a direct evolution of the show in cyberspace. Another part of this particular category is appropriate when looking to this community. The Internet is a place that can decrease tension in social situations as there are no aesthetics and therefore race and gender can become inconsequential.

Finally, Lull's (1982) social learning category refers to the processes involved in socialization. Peirce (1991) also writes about the importance of social learning, offering it as an explanation for most social structures and beliefs (pp. 255-257). Alt.tv.simpsons is a transnational audience, and one can presume that each member belongs to several other communities, not only in the real world, but perhaps also on the Internet as well.

We have drawn some fundamental comparisons between cyberspace communities and real world communities; they are very similar. We have suggested that the three basic components of Anderson's (1991) imagined communities are present in cyberspace as they are in the real world. We may therefore posit that if the structures of communities are artificial and socially learned, then, no matter where the communities are formed and where the borderlines are drawn, they will fundamentally be alike. The individuals involved in the community bring the learned structure with them to the newly formed group.

Finally, after careful examination of the newsgroup, it is clear that a transnational interpretive community such as alt.tv.simpsons is not interpreting the text by assimilating it, not merely relying on the literal meaning of the text. There are more factors involved

in the interpretive process than that. The community considers the text sacred, and so tries to stick to the original meaning. However, this community has thoroughly integrated the text, in fact it is a product of the text and has evolved with the program. These factors suggest Thomas' (1991) syncretism is a more accurate categorization of the final interpretation. The vast array of nationalities and cultures that members bring to the overall interpretation produces a hybrid; many elements come together, creating a new combined interpretation.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this investigation was to discover, through analyzing

alt.tv.simpsons, how a transnational community interprets a text. There were several steps

in this process. First it was important to understand the intended message put fourth by

the creators, writers, and producers of the show. To do this, I briefly looked at the show's

history, explored the American ideology that Matt Groening was portraying through his

characters and briefly described the main characters on the show. Rupert Murdoch

himself was discussed as a transnational phenomenon, and his corporation and networks

were found to be an easy market for transnational media.

The idea of a transnational audience was introduced in chapter two and expanded

on in chapter three. Such audiences can no longer be defined by conventional terms. The

Simpsons is broadcast to more than 60 countries, so by defining the audience as

transnational I could take all audience groups into consideration when looking at the

interpretation of the text. Also in chapter three, I explored the fundamentals of

community and Benedict Anderson's (1991) idea of imagined communities, the three

principals of which are language and religion, patriotism, and technology.

We then went on to look at how a community interprets a text by exploring the

works of Fish (1980) and others involved in understanding interpretive communities. A

community creates an interpretation through its collective knowledge. Thomas (1991)

introduces three categories of interpretation – assimilation, appropriation, and syncretism.

I then analyzed three types of audience groups. The international English speaking audience tended both to assimilate and appropriate the text. The non-English speaking audience had a greater degree of diversity in its interpretation, and tended to appropriate more than assimilate. The Christian audience also appropriated and assimilated.

With a clear understanding of the text, interpretive communities, and the idea of a transnational audience, I could then analyze a community that is a direct product of The Simpsons. Alt.tv.simpsons is a transnational community that meets in cyberspace to discuss the show. I investigated the community's interpretation of the show. To begin, I compared and contrasted Internet groups with real world communities. The most significant difference seemed to be in their perceptions of time and space. Then I examined the studies of Giese (1998) and Turkle (1996) to gain a better understanding of how Internet groups are modeled.

I applied Anderson's (1991) three fundamentals of imagined communities to alt.tv.simpsons. I found that all three principles applied in a way that was similar to real world communities. Then I took Lull's (1982) research into media effects on communities, which he split into the categories of relational, the bringing together of people through the media; dominance, the hierarchical structure; avoidance, the need to avoid social situations; and social learning, the concept of socially learned behavior.

Although there is evidence of the relational, dominance, and avoidance categories in the analysis of alt.tv.simpsons, what is most important is the evidence of social learning. This, along with Anderson's (1991) principle that all communities are based on the same fundamentals, led me to the conclusion that the interpretation of the text by this

transnational audience is one of hybridization, or as Thomas (1991) put it, syncretism. The many members of the newsgroup belong to other communities with the same fundamental principles. It is their existing knowledge that makes the community in cyberspace so similar to that of the real world. This may seem axiomatic. However, when their preexisting social learning is combined with their disparate cultural backgrounds, the overall interpretation of The Simpsons becomes layered, and the result is hybridization, a new meaning made up of a convergence of several distinct meanings.

In the future, I feel it would be beneficial to study other Simpsons' cybergroups in order to compare communities based on the same common theme as that of the community I found at alt.tv.simpsons. The Simpsons are the basis for hundreds of Internet communities, and with this one commonality would the rules of language and hierarchy prove to be the same? If a language were to be created for other Simpsons' Internet groups would it contain similar slang, phrases, and abbreviations to that found on this site? Some members of alt.tv.simpsons stated that they were also members of other Simpsons' cybergroups; are they loyal to both groups, and do they attempt to implement interpretations from one group to another?

The Internet may lack the physical and tangible aspects that real world groups have. However, the time and effort some of the dedicated members input into this community suggests more loyalty than that found in real some world groups. It is rare that one finds a community that has the dedication, let alone the capability, to meet and talk for hours each day. These members may not have the real world benefit of physicality but they have fewer constraints in terms of time and space. The bulletin board thread system means that a conversation that can be read in a minute may be promulgated

over a number of days. Furthermore, it allows people to communicate from different locations all over the world while still feeling that they are part of a highly established community. It would be interesting to explore this new phenomenon.

As technology becomes faster and more accessible, the capabilities of Internet communities will grow. With visual stimuli and audio responses becoming more available, the interpretation of text will evolve. The Internet created the foundation for these communities with no sense of time or place, and the possibilities of community development in the future are vast. Perhaps in the future as technologies change there will be an alteration in the fundamental structure of these communities, and this may well continue to change the way community interpret text.

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