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"We'll Get Through This Together": Fan Cultures and Mediated Social Support on AMC's Talking Dead

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“WE’LL GET THROUGH THIS TOGETHER”: FAN CULTURES AND MEDIATED
SOCIAL SUPPORT ON AMC’S *TALKING DEAD*

by

Jeremy V. Adolphson

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
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in Communication

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May 2018

ABSTRACT

“WE’LL GET THROUGH THIS TOGETHER”: FAN CULTURES AND MEDIATED SOCIAL SUPPORT ON AMC’S *TALKING DEAD*

by

Jeremy V. Adolphson

The University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, 2018
Under the Supervision of Professor Nancy Burrell

In this rhetorical analysis, the role of fandom through the technological advances in new media communication and its impact on social media are examined. Specifically, I analyze the rhetorical strategies that individuals use online in order to create narratives reaffirming their own conceptualizations of what it means to be a fan. This dissertation explores how changes in our contemporary media landscape has afforded a new space in popular culture, particularly the television genre of the Live After Show, which is specifically geared towards fans gaining public momentum, while highlighting the productive and performative elements of fan labor. The primary texts used in the dissertation are the AMC Live After Show, *Talking Dead*, along with *The Walking Dead* subReddit forums to illustrate how the various fan narratives constitute a typology of an engaged fan. The central argument is that fandom is not only constituted within the individual, but that *The Walking Dead* fans use their collective identity to maintain and enforce a sense of decorum, both on the subReddit forums and against those celebrity-guests-as-fans appearing on *Talking Dead*, in order to discipline certain behaviors not conducive towards the vision of the engaged fan. Such disciplinary actions are not limited just to online fans, but are also spearheaded, at times, by *Talking Dead*'s host, Chris Hardwick. Hardwick, through a series of case studies, attempts to further align himself with those engaged *The Walking Dead* fans, by actively exerting power in these televised interactions to reinforce and return the discussion to

more appropriate topics. Intertwined throughout these various rhetorical theories are instances for the role that social support plays throughout the construction and constitution of fan identity. The analysis illustrates how communication technology aids in contributing to the creation of discursive spaces where fans can direct their emotional appeals and experience some sort of resolution or catharsis by sharing their stories and publicly expressing their feelings of grief and sorrow. The rhetorical construction of fandom in a social media environment provides a wealth of textual narratives that push the continuum of fan studies in new directions.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

While people have been able to express their fandom for popular media in many forms for many years, recent innovations in social media have begun to open up new possibilities, the likes of which we have not seen before. During the 1960s-1980s, fans of certain television shows could participate in that fandom in several ways: one way might be for individuals to host viewing parties at their home and invite others to watch and discuss the broadcast as a group, another type of engagement for the fans may have included subscribing to a fan zine about a particular television series, or depending on their resources and availability, attend a fan convention to meet celebrities, acquire autographs, converse with other fans, and dress up in costume like their favorite actors. Consider for example the television series *Star Trek*. Airing for three seasons on NBC from 1966-1969, fans had multiple avenues to interact and express their fandom. The first *Star Trek* zine, *Spockanalia*, a 90 page booklet, appeared in 1967, and featured stories from actors like Leonard Nimoy, information for fans to participate in letter-writing campaigns to keep the series on-air, and fan fiction/poetry where individuals incorporated characters into their own unofficial and unlicensed creative works (Verba, 1996).

Fandom in the twenty-first century still encompasses all of the above types of fan practices (e.g., conventions, magazines/zines, fan fiction, viewing parties) but something new has been added. Fans today seem to get more consistent and closer access to the shows and their stars, and sometimes can even interact with them via social media. These types of rhetorical interactions are new, they are impactful, and they are worth studying.

Social media, as a communication medium, is transforming the potential and potency of fandom through increased affordances of interaction, and also is allowing for a rhetorical reconceptualization of what it means to be a fan. Fandom, when considered against the

technological backdrop of social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and others, constitutes a unique identity that is aided by greater degrees of fans' direct connection to their respected object, with multiple access points to create new avenues of rhetorical inquiry unseen prior to social media.

Fans, who once were thought of only as existing within marginalized and specialized niche communities, are now seen breaking down barriers by entering the mainstream public and popular culture, establishing their presence as a distinct vocal audience. The growth of social media in recent years has increased the visible public rhetoric of fan communities, and has created interesting reverberations throughout contemporary popular culture that challenge not only traditional notions of fandom, but the public culture in which fans participate, and the means of such participation.

Consider the following example from fan scholars Larsen & Zuberis (2012), commenting on a new model for fandom – one in which actors/creators are interacting more with their fans:

The actors in attendance have certainly demonstrated how clearly they understand both the power of fandom and the new model of interacting with their fans. They tweet us, they have 'friended' us on Facebook. And in opposition to the historical construction of fan/producer interactions, they have even formed more meaningful relationships with some of us – friendships, business partnerships and connections that further mutual charitable causes (p.1).

While I am not suggesting that the above quote is the case for all fan/celebrity interactions, it usefully draws attention to the developing phenomenon of how social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter are revising what it means to be a "fan," and how celebrities and popular media producers are reaching out to their fans in more overt ways. New media technologies

have spurred new opportunities for fans, celebrities, and the shows that unite them in meaningful interactions. One primary reason for a celebrity to create and maintain a Twitter account is to publicly accommodate those fans by providing a sense of closeness and immediacy for those fans that choose to “follow” them online. The celebrity’s Twitter account allows for the possibility to publicly amplify their voice and specifically target their rhetoric toward their fans and followers. This fan/celebrity relationship on Twitter operates using a rhetoric of closeness whereby inside information is instantaneously made available to those fans who follow them. The new measure of a celebrity is not just about having a certain number of followers, but rather what having a certain number of followers allows the celebrity to do rhetorically – be it self-promotion, public advocacy, or everyday insights into their life.

Consider two examples of celebrities and their use of Twitter: Ashton Kutcher and Nathan Fillion. In 2009, Ashton Kutcher became the first person to reach 1 million followers on Twitter – narrowly beating out media network CNN (Griggs & Sutter, 2009). Kutcher’s rise in popularity on Twitter was met with the criticism that celebrities and media hype were dominating the micro-blogging potential that Twitter provides. According to the CNN article, Kutcher’s rise to 1 million followers was a milestone that brought Twitter into the mainstream by proposing a shift in how fans can interact with a particular celebrity. Kutcher proclaimed: “We now live in an age in media that a single voice can have as much power and relevance on the Web, that is, as an entire media network, and I think that to me was shocking” (quoted in Griggs & Sutter, 2009). The Kutcher anecdote gives us insight that social media plays by a different set of rules. In the eight years since Kutcher became the first individual to surpass the 1 million follower mark on Twitter, celebrity and media popularity on social media platforms like Twitter continue to use the power of social media to communicate a rhetoric of closeness by sharing

tidbits of their daily activities with their fans. These interactions speak to an active rhetorical decision on behalf of the celebrity or media producer to respond to the situation created because of these technological advances. Social media then is not just another new medium that follows from others. It is a strange, at times unpredictable, but nonetheless rhetorically interesting communication phenomenon to study.

Celebrities and television shows use social media websites like Twitter in a reciprocal relationship to enhance the popularity of the particular show or actor starring on that show. Take for example the ABC show *Castle* and its lead actor, Nathan Fillion. Fillion is no stranger to using Twitter to reach and interact with his fans. His Twitter account @NathanFillion currently has more than 3.4 million followers. Actors like Fillion discuss Twitter as providing a sense of immediacy that other social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) do not. Fillion says, “What I love about Twitter is that it’s forced brevity. The 140-character maximum really forces you to be concise. I like the immediacy of it, and the fact that you can reach so many people in an instant; it blows my mind” (quoted in Silberman, 2011). Celebrities like Fillion espouse a sense of immediacy, and closeness with their Twitter followers by maintaining that they personally manage their account. As Fillion notes:

I know a lot of people who don’t do it [manage their own Twitter accounts] for themselves and to me that’s just...come on. It’s 140 characters; you really can’t handle that? It’s important to me because if someone’s following you on Twitter, they really ought to be following *you* on Twitter. If it’s my Twitter, I want you to see what I’m doing. I want you to see what’s going on with me (quoted in Silberman, 2011).

This reciprocity factors in because of what a celebrity like Nathan Fillion brings to the TV show *Castle*. Supporters of Fillion’s creative persona on the large and small screen, coupled with his

online presence via Twitter, have helped sustain ratings for ABC's *Castle* while also keeping his past work on the cult-TV show *Firefly* very much alive and cherished for his fan base. *Castle*'s executive producer and creator, Andrew Marlow, attributed part of *Castle*'s success to Fillion's legions of followers on Twitter: The ratings "got a boost from star Nathan Fillion's fan following, which tracked him from *Desperate Housewives* and – more significantly – the short-lived *Firefly*. He stokes fan flames via Twitter frequently. In the early years, Nathan's fan base was crucial to us getting the word out" (Dawn, 2013). Fillion's use of Twitter as a vehicle for self-promotion is clearly evident in that he uses social media as a tool to increase support for his body of work. But what needs to be emphasized is how the discourse produced on social media can expand and highlight the practical dimensions of the rhetoric of fan engagement. What we are seeing is that advances in communication technology across various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, Instagram) allow and reward an egocentric and largely selfish dimension of self-promotion by highlighting or "liking" the mundane and ritualistic activities on one's life (from publicizing the selfie you took on vacation, posting pictures of what you had for dinner, or simply showing a picture of your clean apartment). While it may be common for celebrities via social media to promote their own creative endeavors, there is much to speak on when individuals use these communication technologies to coalesce around a common identity marker.

One such example that highlights this practical rhetorical relationship between social media and individuals can be seen through the fan-based discourse produced and created in the AMC television show *Talking Dead*. The use and integration of social media has amplified our current sharing and over-sharing culture. To be sure, individuals discuss their interests, likes and dislikes but social media has made this type of talk more public and assessable. From taking and

posting selfies or photos of food, to following, reading, and enjoying the frequent everyday comments of certain users (e.g., celebrities, bloggers, political pundits) about the minutia of their lives, the public consumption of ideas across social media is now marketable as a type of entertainment. Given the cultural climate surrounding the use and consumption of social media, it makes sense that someone harnessed this type of discourse into creating a televised show. *Talking Dead* is such a show that taps into *The Walking Dead* fan discourse on social media while also targeting those viewers/fans seeking additional information about the stories and narratives of the actors/producers/directors of *The Walking Dead*.

Focus of the Dissertation

Of particular interest to me is the way in which social media engagements with fans are managed by and incorporated into a relatively new genre of media, which are post-episode discussion shows of popular scripted television series. Specifically, I am interested in *Talking Dead*, which is a fan discussion show that airs live immediately following a new episode of the popular horror-drama series *The Walking Dead*. What makes *Talking Dead* distinct is not just the immediacy with which it airs, but that it harnesses the power of social media during the airing of *The Walking Dead* to solicit and generate fan content that then forms the basis for the *Talking Dead* episode. As such, *Talking Dead* depends on fan interaction via social media in order to generate a significant amount of the content that makes up each episode. The close integration of show, fan, and social media creates a unique opportunity to explore the communication intersections formed and to study the impact of such intersections on the rhetorics of fan-engagement.

In my dissertation, I am interested chiefly in how new social media technologies create the opportunity for a more participatory fandom, one that has unique and distinct properties. I

argue that the television show *Talking Dead* validates the importance of fan-based interactions, but does so by rhetorically constituting a specific fan identity that appears guided by rules of decorum. We should not forget though that *Talking Dead*, as an entity of the AMC network (the television network that broadcasts both *The Walking Dead* and *Talking Dead*), profits by sustaining or increasing the ratings of the scripted series, *The Walking Dead*. The rhetorically disciplined, publicly visible fan interactions on *Talking Dead* are at times at odds with *The Walking Dead* fan discussions found on non-AMC social media websites, such as Reddit. These tensions felt and communicated among *The Walking Dead* fans are exacerbated when situating the in-between space that *Talking Dead* fans occupy along the internet's technological landscape. The *Talking Dead* subReddit forums are not a completely free and open social media forum devoid of rules and restrictions. The various subReddits are enforced by moderators who help manage submissions and comments and can "remove items, approve items that have been erroneously removed, and mark items as Not Safe for Work" (Reddit Moderation, 2016).

My interests are in how recent developments in television and social media are propelling fandom in new directions. Even with these new discursive institutional spaces, fan behavior is not *carte blanche*. In my dissertation I examine critically the fan's rhetorical commentary from both the institutional arena of AMC's *Talking Dead* and in the non-affiliated web-based forums on Reddit in order to represent and preserve the broad spectrum of fan and anti-fan behaviors of *The Walking Dead*.

In my dissertation, I focus on one specific fan-base, that of the AMC show *The Walking Dead*, by interrogating both how the fans are being rhetorically constituted and constitute themselves through social media, and how the fan's rhetoric constitutes the *Talking Dead* show. To carry out this dissertation, my textual artifacts about *The Walking Dead* fandom include: 1)

on-air discussions and interactions presented on AMC's *Talking Dead*; 2) subReddit forums¹ written by fans commenting on the live after-show *Talking Dead*; and, 3) the various statements made by popular media commentators about these two sets of artifacts.

For my dissertation, I will not be analyzing individual user tweets that were submitted to *Talking Dead*, due to the overwhelming amount of tweets and accessibility of isolating individual tweets over the past six years². Rather, I am choosing to focus on specific instances of fan-based discussion that aired on *Talking Dead* while also comparing and contrasting those with elements of social media fandom found on *The Walking Dead* subReddit forums. To be sure, there is more rhetoric of *The Walking Dead* fandom outside of the *Talking Dead* depiction, but my aim in this project is to address the type of fandom presented through the interactions broadcast and discussed around *Talking Dead*. Focusing solely on the mediated description of fandom via *Talking Dead*, however, presents an incomplete picture of digital fandom – the fan-discussions featured on *Talking Dead* are unique and pave the way for future fan-related shows, but these interactions are severely disciplined, subject to strict participation guidelines imposed by AMC for maintaining and sustaining appropriate levels of decorum. To account for this condition, I have included fan interactions found on the *Talking Dead* subReddit that capture a more open and uncensored arena for fans to express themselves and their reactions, positively

¹ subReddits are organized by specific areas of interest. Users on Reddit search out various subReddits based on a variety of larger topics they wish to explore. These subReddits can center on any type of media content (books, film, television, music) and serve as an organized hub whereby Redditors can begin discussing that particular topic. Once a user finds a subReddit they wish to read or post content to, they can subscribe it to, thereby pushing these topics to their homepage.

² As of this writing, *The Walking Dead* has currently finished its sixth season. To gauge the popularity and frequency with which individuals discussed *The Walking Dead*, I visited the website RiteTag.com after the show's broadcast on Sundays to track the amount of times that Twitter users included #thewalkingdead in their tweets. The results indicated that there were over 3,000 unique tweets per hour and 3,300 re-tweets per hour. In addition, the official Twitter account for the television show *The Walking Dead* (@WalkingDead_AMC) had over 4 million followers and over 94,000 unique tweets, while the official *Talking Dead* (@AMCTalkingDead) had over 1.1 million followers and over 2,400 unique tweets.

and negatively, to the show. Through my dissertation, I provide a rhetorical typology of *The Walking Dead* fandom that fans themselves highlight, normalize, and privilege certain types of behavior. It is through this rhetorical disciplining of fan behavior that the collective fans can constitute their unique identity in the age of social media.

The fan-interactions on social media surrounding *Talking Dead* serve as my primary rhetorical text in this dissertation. More specifically, there are two distinct social media interaction sites that I analyzed: 1) the produced discourse from the televised broadcast *Talking Dead*, and 2) the web-based forums from the subReddits as they pertain to discussion about and criticisms against *Talking Dead*. These two discursive texts, when taken together, provide a compelling picture of the constitutive rhetoric of fandom in the era of social media. While the thrust of my analysis is based on fan interactions on the television show *Talking Dead*, I am comparing and contrasting the discourse of fan-interactions found on Reddit to better approximate those discussions not presented live on *Talking Dead* (e.g., the disciplining of fan discussions that is negative towards the host, guests of *Talking Dead*, or storylines of *The Walking Dead*). While individuals use social media websites like Twitter, Reddit, and Facebook for various reasons, my aim in the dissertation is to suggest that the development of television shows like *Talking Dead* provides new opportunities to open up a dialogue on not only the power of discourse, but the ability to use these technological advances to build upon and extend the scope of rhetorical theory.

This chapter provides an entry point for discussing relevant fan-based scholarship from the past 30 years, providing a perspective on the pre-social media era of fandom and continuing to the present. Fans are afforded opportunities to directly engage with the creative side and/or media producers in ways that previously were not technologically possible. It is the choices

made by the media producers and television executives to make this content more rhetorically compelling, thus altering how fans can interact via the institutional spaces of television. To better contextualize the discussion of fandom, I next explain the relevant features of *Talking Dead* that contextualize it rhetorically.

Exploring *Talking Dead* – It’s a Show about What?

Talking Dead is a live after-show to the popular AMC scripted series *The Walking Dead*. Premiering on October 16, 2011, to coincide with the start of the second season of *The Walking Dead*, *Talking Dead* solicits fan-driven content through social media to answer compelling questions about that night’s episode, interact with actors and the creators of the show, and speculate on the future of the popular zombie series. What distinguishes *Talking Dead* from other behind-the-scenes television shows is that the network targets fans of the show and encourages them to submit questions that those fans want answered.

This is an innovative rhetorical space because social media is disrupting traditional notions of fandom; in particular, there is a noticeable change in the communication channels. Fans were not always publicly recognized by the creative and institutional element; instead, they largely were kept at a distance from their object of fandom. Showrunners and producers up until this point were unable to productively interact with the fans. Even though individuals could create fanzines, attend unsponsored conventions to meet with other fans or see actors from their beloved television show, or even post to various computer bulletin boards, before social media there were few opportunities to feel immediately and emotionally connected to particular cultural text (e.g., television show, comic book, film, sports team, actor). More so, there was no incentive for the producers of a television show to interact with the fans. Nowadays however, the incorporation and use of social media means that the showrunners can have a more reliable and

direct access to fan discourse and can also exert productive control over it. Producers have also recognized that a show like *Talking Dead* can bolster *The Walking Dead* ratings, so the motive exists from the producer's perspective to incorporate and include these fan discourses and narratives.

Fans, interacting in the transmediated environment of *Talking Dead*, have the practical means to create, respond to, and participate publicly alongside the production side of the entertainment industry. Shows like *Talking Dead* are beginning to take notice of the large amount of fans that social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, and Reddit afford, and have begun taking stock in these fan comments and speculations to create new audiences – enabling them to do something more active than simply “following” or “liking” a celebrity, to instead providing a venue for their voice to be heard by being directly involved in discussions of their favorite show.

Television shows like *Talking Dead* stand as rhetorical examples of the changing terrain of mediated communication associated with what Paul Booth (2012) refers to as *transgenic media*, which he defines as “the specific type of online/digital/social/new media that has become influential in the past ten years of our culture” (p. 8). Transgenic media conceptualizes how *Talking Dead* is able to rely so heavily on fan content, thus enacting new structures such as an active web presence and the reliance on Twitter to solicit content for the episode(s). Transgenic media invites audiences/users to actively participate in the creation or extension of available content.

With a greater audience presence in the foreground to publicly voice or share their concern/praise as fans of *The Walking Dead*, transgenic media makes it discursively possible for the vernacular voices to shine through in novel ways. According to Booth, “All transgenic

media exist as a combination of individual contributions coupled with professionally produced templates [whereby] the focus becomes more on distribution rather than the production of content” (p. 9). Transgenic media creates a new discursive space where the focus is based on the interactions individuals have with media. Shows like *Talking Dead* provide a controlled space for what fans can *do* and how they communicate by providing new modes of participation. This is possible because production companies like AMC, as rhetorical agents, grant space for carrying out such interactions. The question before us now lies in ways in which fans, celebrities, and shows rhetorically engage in these communicative possibilities, and taking a closer look at *Talking Dead* provides a means for answering that and other questions of interest.

Let’s Talk about Fandom: *Talking Dead* Format

For fans of *The Walking Dead*, *Talking Dead* goes beyond presenting the audience with just supplemental information such as additional show-related content, behind-the-scenes features, and in-depth interviews with the creative side of the show, by highlighting fan interactions as a driving force for what makes the show work. By using fan-driven content to propel their show, *Talking Dead* rhetorically uses the “live after-show” format in a novel way.

On October 16, 2011, the first episode of *Talking Dead* aired on AMC following the season two premiere of *The Walking Dead*, a show which had already established itself as having a strong fan base. The show, hosted by comedian, actor, and creator of the *Nerdist* podcast Chris Hardwick, comprises a strange amalgam of genres for a cable network show. It simultaneously is a talk show, a behind-the-scenes featurette, a celebrity showcase, and fan forum. Hardwick demonstrates an enthusiastic passion for all things “pop culture” by assembling a broad array of guests and fans (e.g., producers, actors, and writers from the TV show *The Walking Dead*, celebrities, musicians, actors, and athletes who are fans of the series), as well as incorporating an

ever-present social media fan-base, to discuss the episode that just aired. But *Talking Dead* can be read as doing more than just summarizing and debating the popular zombie apocalypse show. Henry Jenkins (2006) suggests that we are currently living in a convergence culture, and in today's culture, this statement is almost taken-for-granted: for example, we can easily stream movies or television shows on our cell phones; or we can read articles or books from our tablets; and live sports events frequently ask viewers to log on to a managed website to receive even more information about the event than the announcers have time to share. It is not just that we live in an age of multiple media, but that the convergence of those technologies is creating the opportunity for altering the very content of our media and how we consume and participate in them. As such, it is worth considering the ways in which not only our popular entertainments are reconfigured, but also those who watch them. *Talking Dead* further propels both convergence culture as well as the intertextual space of meaning for fans to create and navigate their identity in an age of social media. All of these changes have shifted the visibility and interaction of fan culture to something more communal, rather than just individualistic modes of reception.

Here is how *Talking Dead* works: According to the *Talking Dead* rules (www.amctv.com/shows/talking-dead/rules) on the AMC website, there are four official ways in which fans can submit their questions: 1) calling 1-855-DEAD-LIVE a half hour prior to and during the EST broadcast of *The Walking Dead*; 2) logging on the official Facebook page and submitting their question; 3) Tweeting either the episode-specific hashtag (which is revealed on-screen during the broadcast of *The Walking Dead*) or the general *Talking Dead* hashtag (e.g., #AMCTalkingDead) on Twitter; and, 4) registered users can visit the AMC *Talking Dead* website and post their questions/discussion on the appropriate forum.

It is relatively straightforward for individuals to submit content/questions/queries to *Talking Dead*. And since *Talking Dead* is tapping into an already vocal population rife with rich content, the show itself is then able to highlight and select among these comments. Scholarship in communication has described various levels of fan-engagement, especially in an online discussion forum (Jenkins, 1995), and *Talking Dead* is co-opting this content by bringing fandom to the forefront of public discussion. For submissions to be considered for *Talking Dead*, the content must “be original, truthful, unpublished and created solely by you” (*Talking Dead* Rules). It is up to the producers of AMC and *Talking Dead* to decide which submissions should be included during the episode broadcast – though the specifics of those decision-making processes are not publicly made available.

Over the course of 99 episodes and spanning seven seasons of *The Walking Dead* at the time of this writing, *Talking Dead* follows a specific template of segments. The format of *Talking Dead* is that of a live after-show, and thus contributes to the sense of a discursive space where fans can gather. Indeed, the invitation for fan participation is so strong that the “live” element of *Talking Dead* positions fans to interact with the content even while the show airs. Fans may use a variety of social media platforms, as previously mentioned, to voice their thoughts, including (but not limited to) logging on to the official Twitter handle (@AMCTalkingDead) and posting/following along with the comments, providing commentary about the actual episode of *Talking Dead*, or submitting, reading, or replying to various posts on their personal or public forums. *Talking Dead* provides multiple access points to engage with fans via social media. Aside from the direct questions posted to the show through social media ahead of time, fans also can tweet the specific comments based on each episode’s hashtag. During the first two seasons of *Talking Dead*, Chris Hardwick would appear on screen at

commercial breaks of *The Walking Dead* and remind audiences to tune in to *Talking Dead* immediately after *The Walking Dead*, and would then encourage fans to tweet using that episode's specific hashtag (e.g., #RIPAxel). Hardwick usually then devotes a portion of the show to reading the most creative, funny, or cringe-worthy uses of the hashtag that fans have submitted.

After introducing the celebrities and producers on *Talking Dead*, Hardwick then asks for initial comments from the celebrity guests based on the events that took place during the broadcast of *The Walking Dead*. After his initial introduction, Hardwick reminds viewers to submit their own questions and participate in the ongoing discussion: "The conversation is just starting about the show tonight. We want to hear from you guys at home. We're going to read your questions and comments and answer your phone calls. What is gnawing away at you? Tweet us @AMCTalkingDead, or call us toll free". A version of this quote occurs during the first five minutes of each episode and then immediately transitions to the episode's poll question, whereby fans can go online to vote on their answer to an episode-specific question. While the poll responses are closed rhetorically, the way in which it is incorporated is more open and highlights one of the myriad ways that *Talking Dead* is trying to get fans to participate and engage with the show.

Rhetorically Situating *Talking Dead* in Popular Media

Media scholar Bob Batchelor (2012) suggests that we should view all of popular culture "as the interface itself that draws viewers to or repels them from their [selected] object" (p. xv). For fans, interacting with their object based on life experiences and creating new meanings for the object is a rhetorical action – it is the fans who negotiate their identity along the lines afforded them by the story. Batchelor, in reframing popular culture as an action rather than just

an object, suggests that it is “not only central to what people believe but also crucial in how they understand and interpret the world” (p. xvii). Batchelor’s theory, however, only offers a one-way view of popular culture and fandom: popular culture affecting/influencing fandom. It does not address the ways in which fans may influence the popular culture text. *Talking Dead* allows for the rhetorical possibility of influencing popular culture more immediately and directly than before by establishing a two-way mode of communication that centers on the emotional connection and closeness fans express about *The Walking Dead*.

Fandom, as both a rhetorical action and identity, now can be rhetorically constituted through social media. *Talking Dead* alters the distinction between the rhetor and audience by constituting multiple audiences as fans: viewers of *Talking Dead*, fans tweeting using the official Twitter handle @AMCTalkingDead, fans participating in online forums, and celebrities as fans engaging in the same type of fan labor that non-celebrity fans engage in. The producers of *Talking Dead* use content from social media to sanction and solicit fans to create and submit discourse/content for *Talking Dead* (e.g., the bulk of “talking” points on the show come directly from social media – Twitter questions, Facebook, Reddit, and AMC’s official blog submissions as well as creative uses of the official episode’s hashtag).

In the opening minute of the premiere episode of *Talking Dead*, host Chris Hardwick provided a synopsis of the show’s format, and the logic he espouses, I argue, helps to account for the show’s success. Addressing the television audience directly during the first episode, Hardwick said, “And you guys are part of the show too. This is why we’re doing this; we’re going to read your questions and comments live”. It is not novel that fans enjoy discussing the minutiae of television shows, and historically, since the 1950s, media producers have been relying on the Nielsen ratings to determine how their products fared among their audiences

(Nielsen, 2015). In our current mediascape, television programs like *Talking Dead* are situated along the evolutionary development media regarding the rhetorical relationship between fans and popular culture by providing a sense of immediacy and influence that was previously unavailable to fans and producers.

The innovative ways that *Talking Dead* alters the rhetorical possibilities for fans create new opportunities and discursive spaces for fan-based interaction to occur:

Rather than organize itself like a traditional talk show, *Talking Dead* is laid out as if *The Walking Dead's* most hardcore supporters have written it. In some sense, they have. Host Chris Hardwick is a self-proclaimed zombie super freak, calling the gig a ‘dream job,’ and it shows. Hardwick's interviews make it evident he's heavily involved in the fandom that surrounds *The Walking Dead*, and his Twitter account is a go-to spot for plot theories (Mann, 2013)

Braxton (2013) attributes part of the show's success and appeal to the host, Chris Hardwick, and his banter and rapport with the guests. According to the A.V. Club, “Hardwick himself is not just the host, but also a self-proclaimed fan whose enthusiasm and knowledge of *The Walking Dead* narratives allow him to rhetorically highlight the role of fandom by first, speaking on behalf of social media fandom (e.g., from reading the emails and tweets to expressing the emotional climate on social media) and second, encouraging his guests to interact with each other on-set and directly with the submitted comments/questions”. The format of *Talking Dead* highlights the roles of fandom – fan deliberation is not happening just online or in their own homes, but is actually a part of *Talking Dead*. Rather than marginalizing it as a specialized subcultural niche, the show is “an open forum for geeking out, asking questions, and sounding off about characters and places [fans] have grown to love” (Saraiya, 2013). As a specific genre

of television, *Talking Dead* switches from the standard one-directional dissemination of information from producers to audience by encouraging the audience to interact directly with the material.

Talking Dead manages not only to draw in an audience, but rank higher than other premium drama series on network and premium television broadcasts. According to the website TV by the Numbers (2013), the premiere episode of *Talking Dead* drew in 1.16 million viewers in the U.S., while the March 31, 2013 season two finale of *Talking Dead* brought in around 5.16 million U.S. viewers, beating out the season three premiere of the HBO series *Game of Thrones*. Viewership of *Talking Dead* has continued to increase dramatically over subsequent years (Seidman, 2011; Kondolojy, 2013). That the number of viewers *Talking Dead* draws rivals that of scripted TV shows speaks to the show's dedicated fan-base.

Talking Dead can be understood as creating what Derek Kompare (2011) calls *moments of television*. Kompare studied how podcasts by *Battlestar Galactica* creator, Ronald D. Moore, created "temporary and fluid sub-communities, particular hot spots of cult fandom, where the words and personae of series authors generate new dimensions of textuality and interaction" (p. 111). Viewed through this lens, *Talking Dead* is the epitome of such moments of television, but also marks important differences. Whereas the *Battlestar Galactica* podcasts were broadcast online through the SyFy Channel website, *Talking Dead* airs immediately after the episode on television. And whereas podcasts are a one-way channel of communication, *Talking Dead* provides a dynamic exchange between those actually on the show and those watching it.

The ability for *Talking Dead* to draw in fans has positioned it as more than just an afterthought to *The Walking Dead*, but an appreciable rhetorical space in its own right. About halfway through the premiere episode of *Talking Dead*, host Chris Hardwick linked up via

satellite with *The Walking Dead* creator/writer Robert Kirkman, who was promoting the second season of the television show at the annual New York Comic Convention to an audience of over 3,000 fans. As their conversation continued, Hardwick enthusiastically commented not only on the popularity of *The Walking Dead* phenomenon but the uniqueness of *Talking Dead*: “We’re making a live show here based on a thing that you [Kirkman] created. Comic books turned into a TV show, the show then spawned a talk show”. The presence of *Talking Dead* fans creates the opportunity for rhetorical spaces to emerge in a unique situation not previously discussed by fan scholarship pre-social media.

While it is not unique for fans to discuss at-length the intricate details of their beloved texts, the airing of a televised live after-show on a particular fandom is indicative of the impact social media has in our culture. Shows like *Talking Dead* set a precedent as a unique genre of television with its focus on discussion and deliberation. Although there are late night talk shows and sports commentators who analyze plays and statistics, these programs often highlight and frame discussion towards whatever the celebrity guest is promoting; *Talking Dead* rather, highlights fandom as a rhetorical action. Take for example a trio of supplementary shows released by BBC – all of which presented fans responding to media content rather than participating in the process. First, after the resurgence of *Doctor Who* by the BBC in 2005, the network broadcast *Doctor Who Confidential* from 2005-2011, which aired on the Saturday following the weekly episode. This documentary series more closely resembled that of a DVD bonus feature, highlighting non-interactive elements by providing viewers an inside look at the filming process, cast and crew interviews, and other behind-the-scenes clips. Similar to *Doctor Who Confidential*, BBC also aired *Torchwood Declassified*, a documentary style show in 2008 – following the same format as the previously mentioned *Doctor Who Confidential*. Finally, BBC

aired *Heroes Unmasked*, based on the popular American series, for 46 episodes, which was filmed on location on the *Heroes* set and featured interviews with cast/crew. What these supplementary shows have in common is that they are presented in a way that does not allow for active fan interactions. Even though social media technology existed during this time period, fandom was broadcast as data transmission rather than data creation – the revealing scenes granted fans more access to information, but communication remained one-sided. The inception of television shows like *Talking Dead* demonstrated there was a choice to make to purposefully incorporate fan-driven interactions to drive the content of the broadcast.

More recently, websites such as AfterBuzz TV have begun airing fan-centered discussions podcasts in which individuals can choose to watch them off their own website, stream them via YouTube, or download the audio from iTunes. AfterBuzz TV offers a variety of content-driven audio and visual shows on popular TV series where fans can call, e-mail, or tweet the show's moderator to participate in the discussion and speculate on the nature of the episode just aired. In 2012, the online broadcast channel AfterBuzz TV began broadcasting podcasts through YouTube and iTunes of television shows aired each week. Known as the "Aftershow Network", AfterBuzz TV proclaims over 20 million weekly downloads of their content from over 150 countries worldwide. Maria Menounos, the co-creator of AfterBuzz TV, said that she and her partner Keven Undergaro came up with the idea to have a particular online space available for fans to discuss their favorite television show after watching the finale of ABC's *Lost*. She "realized that people were naturally turning to the web for community and conversation about TV [and] AfterBuzz TV [became] a place for fans, where they can indulge in their love of favorite shows free of celebrity gossip" (Dreier, 2012). Fans of *Lost* did not have an on-air space to vent/grieve about the series finale and instead turned to the internet, namely

various discussion board forums and blogs to voice their opinions and theories about the mysteries of the show. Menounos highlighted the space where fans can interact with each other about recently viewed television shows as “the way of the future” (Dreier, 2012). What makes shows like *Talking Dead* distinct is not the additional content, but that the fan-driven content is being broadcast and incorporated into the show.

In the two years since the online network was launched, the network has grown exponentially. According to their website, AfterBuzz TV produces more than 50 hours of original programming per week on over 200 different series and has a roster of over 400 hosts and moderators who facilitate the podcasts (e.g., everything from *Dancing with the Stars* to *Empire*). While this type of broadcast more closely resembles that of *Talking Dead* (e.g., direct fan interaction – tweeting/emailing questions about the just-viewed episode, celebrity guests of the show talking about their experience) the main difference lies in the presentation of the show – streamed online via channels like YouTube or downloaded from iTunes as a podcast format (e.g., no live studio audience) rather than broadcast on the affiliated network of that particular show. Digital broadcasting channels like AfterBuzz may be the future of online fan-based interaction programs, but *Talking Dead* is providing fans with space to participate in and collectively constitute their identity as an engaged population using the live television format. One *Talking Dead* fan on the subReddit expressed their enthusiasm about winning tickets to the live broadcast:

I just found out that I've won tickets to this weekend's Talking Dead recording. I'm dropping everything to fly in from Minneapolis and I don't want to screw up and not get in. Does anyone have line survivor tips? Show up how early? What to bring/not bring? Eat ahead of time? Are there any other tips you'd like to share? I'm so pumped to see

Danai Gurira, Austin Nicols and Nathan Fillion...and of course Chris Hardwick! I'll reply with my experience when I return (Lqqkout, 2016).

Shows like *Talking Dead* depend upon fandom to function. Without the comments and questions from fans of *The Walking Dead* there would be no need to broadcast such a show, and thus *Talking Dead* provides a key moment to study the interaction produced and constituted by fans. *L.A. Times* media analyst Brad Adgate compared *Talking Dead* to a post-game show for the Super Bowl: "The show has really capitalized on the power of social media. *The Walking Dead* is one of the most popular shows on Twitter and Facebook and this devoted following has always elevated *Talking Dead*" (Braxton, 2013). Likewise, Joel Stillerman, AMC's head of original programming, attributed the show's success in part to "the incredible energy surrounding the show in social media" (as cited in Braxton, 2013). Fans nowadays utilize the transgenic media spirit which Booth (2012) offered by expecting a space where their voices are not just heard, but are invited for participation and interaction. The next section provides an overview on the scholarship of fandom and interaction, paying particular attention to the role of fan's use of social media.

Fandom & Interaction – An Overview

As a rhetorical studies scholar, my interests focus on the specific strategies that fans have used to interact with others via social media to constitute their own identity. In this section, I provide an overview of fan scholarship to outline the foundation for how new media, such as social networking websites, have technologically shaped the rhetorical power and level of interaction for the fan. In doing so, the history of fan scholarship will illustrate a growing need in the discipline of communication to investigate why these changes in technology ultimately are rhetorical decisions.

Studying how fandom is rhetorically constructed through a show like *Talking Dead* differs from past scholarship that identified fans as lacking both the institutional and technological means to dynamically interact with other fans as well as the creators of a show/text. This was not because those fans were any less passionate, but because they and their favorite shows lacked a means for meaningful and simultaneous interaction. Current scholarship in fan studies recognizes that the boundaries between theory and practice are blurring. The fan/producer relationship is also changing due to the “rapidly evolving reciprocal relationship between fan and producers in the time of Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, iPhones and internet access” (Larsen & Zuberis, 2012, p. 7). The rhetorical choices made by the producers and networks to broadcast television shows dominated by fan-interactions has motivated my desire to rhetorically study how these fans’ identities are constructed in shows like *Talking Dead* as a distinct evolutionary step of fandom.

Pre-Social Media Fan Scholarship

Pre-social media fan scholarship (e.g., Tulloch & Jenkins, 1995) outlined a distinction between fans and followers, where fans are those “active participants within fandom as a social, cultural and interpretive institution,” while followers are “audience members who regularly watch and enjoy media programs but who claim no larger social identity on the basis of this consumption” (p. 23). New changes in communication technologies and practices require that we take another look at how fans interact. In the early 1990s, fans were classified as members of the *powerless elite*. Fans faced the dilemma of being “structurally situated between producers they have little control over and the wider public whose continued following of the show can never be assured but on whom the survival of the show depends” (p. 145). This pre-social media definition and classification of fans and followers provide a basis from which fandom has

evolved – becoming more visible in our everyday life. Today’s fans relying on using social media have the ability to follow, connect, and interact at a much greater rate than during the early period of fan-scholarship. Television shows like *Talking Dead* actively select these everyday fan-comments/observations to include as content (e.g., “talking points”) of the show – thus situating the possibility for an increased presence and reliance for fan-based actions.

I am approaching fandom from a rhetorical perspective, so as to study and analyze a variety of discursive strategies and actions undertaken by the fans to assign meaning, relevance, and a sense of identity for their selected text within the textual and material restraints imposed by their chosen venue of demonstration (be it Facebook, Twitter, or AMC television). With the aid of social media, that act of fandom has evolved from a once marginalized, niche community, into a more immersive and interactive worldwide presence guided not only by a technologically savvy public, but one that depends upon an engaged citizen using basic rhetorical tools to persuasively enact their own sense of fandom.

For over 30 years, scholars studying fandom have been at the cutting edge in terms of the amount of productive rhetorical work undertaken by fans themselves. Radway (1984) wrote about the labor that romance novel fans undertook to highlight a practical dimension of what it means to be a fan. For Radway, interviewing romance novel fans indicated a diverse, but not widespread collection of romance fans:

The romance community, then, is not an actual group functioning at the local level. Rather, it is a huge, ill-defined network composed of readers on the one hand and authors on the other. Although it performs some of the same functions carried out by older neighborhood groups, this female community is mediated by the distances of modern mass publishing. Despite the distance, the Smithton women feel personally connected to

their favorite authors because they are convinced that these writers know how to make them happy (p.97).

Published over 30 years ago, Radway was describing a moment when romance novel fans lacked the institutional means to stay connected. During Radway's time, fan activity was very much a localized hobby. Radway's quote highlights the evolutionary process in fan studies as one that adapts to changes in technology. Consider for example, that romance novel fans, despite varying geographical distance, underwent a technological change with the popularity and distribution of mass publishing; some then embraced the technology in order to feel connected to the creators. Similarly, contemporary fans who utilize social media have the possibility to feel connected with their favorite TV broadcast or actor. This changing rhetorical situation warrants that we look again at our approach to studying fans.

Jenkins (1992) argues that fans actively invest in the interpretive strategies of reading and assigning meaning to the texts they consume. Jenkins justified these claims by drawing upon de Certeau's (1984) notion of textual *poaching*. Fans, as textual poachers, were labeled as "nomads" who were in an ongoing struggle for possession over a text and control over its meaning. The practice of fandom was very much marginalized – for example, fans were unable to correspond directly to the actors/producers/creators and had to subversively trespass upon other creative property (e.g., writing fan fiction not part of the official canon). On the other end of the spectrum, there are examples of producers who almost have a hostile relationship with their fans.³ Fans, because of the existing textual situation, lacked the institutional presence or the status as individuals whose comments mattered. Jenkins explained that while the fan may lack

³ Some examples that come to mind are: The estate of Charles Schulz, creator of the comic strip Peanuts, upon his death, only authorized one artist, Tom Everhart, to reproduce in his art, characters from the Peanuts comic strip without facing legal issues. An additional example is production company Lucasfilm, which would knowingly sue individuals who published or used elements from the Star Wars franchise without expressed written approval.

the institutional means to enact change, they “constitute a particularly active and vocal community of consumers whose activities direct attention onto this process of cultural appropriation” (p. 27). Even though these fans were active, they resorted to using guerrilla tactics to “win the battle” in order to reinterpret and offer their own meaning against the dominant vision of the producers of the content – fandom then became a tool for empowerment, providing a voice and identity in opposition against the producers of the texts.

Jenkins (1992), Fiske (2011), and Radway (1984) were concerned with how fans used media texts and what meanings they were creating. These more interpretive and theoretical approaches suggested that the audience could remake the media products in their own images and to highlight their own purpose and interpretation (e.g., polysemic readings) – thus, fans were engaged in a struggle between power and resistance with the producers of media. Fans through pre-social media lacked the opportunity to engage with media producers as they do today.

Rather than focus more attention on the power/resistance paradigm, scholars have now turned towards the Internet to extend the scope of fandom by engaging in everyday fan practices. This shift in fandom from one of resistance to everyday practices has been aided by the growth of social media outlets, which can be noted in more recent scholarship on fan practices. The changing technology does not delegitimize the fan scholarship pre-social media; rather, scholars like Fiske, Jenkins, and Radway provide insights on fan practices that more recent scholars can build upon.

Social Media Fandom – Connecting, “Friending”, Liking, Tweeting

The popularity of social media stems from the creation of social networking websites. According to boyd & Ellison (2007), all social networking sites “contain web-based services that allow individuals to 1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system; 2)

articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection; and 3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (p. 211). Social networking sites, according to boyd (2011) can be thought of as networked publics whereby “they allow people to gather for social, cultural and civic purposes and they help to connect with a world beyond their close friends and families” (p. 39). Conceived of as networked publics, social media sites like Facebook and Reddit are spaces for discourse and opinion but also for the formation and enactment of social identities.

Murthy (2013) provides a distinction between the social networks and social media. Social networks are “friend-based networks where maintaining friendships are critical to the user whereas social media is a broadcast media to publish content to networks known and unknown to the author” (p. 9). In her book *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*, Nancy Baym (2010) suggests that there are two ways to react to communication and technology: “either to express concern or to show the promise for more opportunities to connect with more people” (p. 1). Fandom in an electronic age is providing more outlets for fans to carry out meaningful relationships with other fans as well as to suggest an outlet to connect with those creators/actors associated with their favorite show.

Websites like Twitter and Reddit are also transforming the role of fandom in the 21st century. Scholars have looked to the potential of websites like Twitter to “increase our awareness of others and to augment our spheres of knowledge, tapping us into global networks of individuals who are passionately giving us instant updates on topics and areas in which they are knowledgeable or participating in real-time” (Murthy, 2013, p. x). People participate in social media for a variety of reasons: First, it does not take much physical effort to create a social media profile; second, there are constant rewards for users in terms of the connections made or

acknowledged. Many of the popular platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook) require only that you have a valid e-mail address so that once you create a username you can begin to use their services. Facebook users are able to connect with friends and family members, but users can also join groups related to almost any topic available. Fans of certain television series or actors can “like” a celebrity by clicking on the “like” button on the celebrity’s personal webpage. Upon clicking on the “like” button, any time the celebrity updates their page, the individual user will now be connected and able to see what the celebrity did, where the celebrity was, or just the celebrity’s random thoughts of the day.

Twitter, as a mediated interface to disseminate information at a high rate, becomes amplified when users key in certain hashtags (e.g., #TBT, #TalkingDead) and can then open themselves up to strangers entering the conversation. When *The Walking Dead* broadcasts the episode-specific hashtag on-screen during commercial breaks, fans can tweet using this particular phrase and enter into a very specific conversation – calling forth involvement from the fan community. Scholars like Parks (2011) draw upon the idea of social affordances, or the possibilities for action, that are called forth by a social technology or environment. For a show like *Talking Dead* to solicit questions/feedback from fans across many social networking platforms (e.g., their own blog, Reddit, Twitter, and Facebook), there must be an explicit call. In the case of *Talking Dead*, each episode makes use of a specific hashtag that will put that specific comment/question in the running to be included as discussion/talking points for the show.

The interest in social media for fan-based interactions is rooted in following and responding to the minute-by-minute commentary along with the seemingly unimportant chatter. It is this chatter that, for some fans, contributes to shows like *Talking Dead*. Scholars like Baym (2010) stated that “most relationships maintained [via social media] are weak” (p. 134). Baym

based her classification of weak relationships by comparing the number of offline relationships to those connections made online. To be sure, there does seem to be a discrepancy between the number of fans who follow or “like” a celebrity on social media and those celebrities who follow or “like” their fans, but, as scholars like Baym suggest, producers of the show *Talking Dead* may target those weak relationships because of the built-in audience potential. Cross (2011) found similar results of weak relationships when she analyzed Twitter data and found that “about 10% of active twitter users are responsible for over 90% of the tweets” (p. 31). The act of reading or “favoriting” tweets may not take as much fan labor as frequently posting content on social media platforms, but then again, *Talking Dead* fans likely make up only a portion of the overall *The Walking Dead* fan base. These connections, weak or strong, established by fans via social media are significant enough for a television network to recognize the need to embrace the technological changes and invest in broadcasting a television show around it.

In summary, the increased visibility, greater speeds of social interaction, new means of public performance, and increased access of information is transforming and further facilitating the whole phenomenon of fandom (Duffett, 2013). Scholars like Murthy (2013) suggest that fans now have something in real-time to participate in: Social media like Twitter “affords a unique opportunity to re-evaluate how communication and culture can be individualistic and communal simultaneously” (p. xi). One cannot overlook the production step, however: networks such as AMC took the chance and recognized the opportunity to include fans to connect more with the creative side through the broadcasting of *Talking Dead*. Being on Twitter alone does not make the fan closer to the show – granted, these fans can tweet the celebrities, but without the aid of AMC (or another network) extending an olive branch and providing a controlled space to interact, fans would just be visible because they are participating in a larger discussion on a

public social media website. AMC governs the social media space around what is included during an airing of *Talking Dead*. Fans, in this mediated space, are no longer ashamed to admit their fandom or run the risk of being labeled as “Other”. Focusing on fandom, via fan interactions, through the rhetoric produced from *Talking Dead* as well as the commentary about *Talking Dead* on social media, provides a uniquely rich text for understanding fan practices and communities.

Preview of Dissertation Chapters

My dissertation discusses how changes in new social media technologies create the opportunity for more participatory fandom, including the role of supportive communication as a tool to bring together, evaluate, and, at times, separate fans based on different levels of engagement. I argue that the television show *Talking Dead* validates the importance of fan-based interactions by rhetorically constituting a specific fan identity. In the next chapter I discuss the theoretical and critical perspectives of constitutive rhetoric to situate how an individual’s identity is formed through a particular text. Through my critical framework of analyzing constitutive rhetoric of social media fandom I include two interrelated and essential rhetorical perspectives: 1) the disciplinary function of rhetoric and 2) the role and rules of decorum of televised/mediated discourse. The remaining chapters explore various dimensions and case studies of how *Talking Dead* fans constitute their fandom.

In chapter 3 I analyze the positive and affirming qualities that contribute to an engaged fan of *Talking Dead*. Looking at several episodes of *Talking Dead* as exemplar case studies, I situate the rhetorical strategies that the guests employ to maintain a sustained level of engagement with the show, and how fans, via Reddit, assert their sense of connection to *The Walking Dead*. Chapter 4 describes those negative instances where fan-interactions both on

Talking Dead and via social media do not conform to the decorous space established by the after-show. This chapter draws upon specific instances of *Talking Dead* fandom to stress the importance of both disciplining and constituting certain types of fans: 1) the Negative comments from fans via Reddit about the show and host Chris Hardwick; and 2) suspect “fan” behavior of *Talking Dead* guests Marilyn Manson, Sarah Silverman, and Joel Madden, and how Hardwick and the subReddit fans asserted their loyalty and authenticity to the canon of *The Walking Dead* through their rhetorical disciplining. Chapter 5 details the pathos-driven narratives of social support that both fans on Reddit and actors appearing on *Talking Dead* use to discuss both the fictional grief and sorrow felt in the character’s passing as well as the real-life death of host Chris Hardwick’s father, and the supportive outreach felt within the subReddit community. In the conclusion, I examine the scholarly commentary and larger social and cultural implications of using social media, not just as a communication tool to assert one’s own identity as a fan, but as an opportunity to stay connected to the ever-changing technological landscape.

Chapter 1 References

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Chapter 2 – Theoretical Perspectives on Fandom

Introduction

Take a moment and ask yourself: what are you a fan of? Are there certain authors, actors, sports teams whose work you enjoy watching or events you enjoy attending? What is it that compels you to fully embrace a certain object and elevate it over others? Being a fan and embracing your love and affiliation towards that specific fandom is a rhetorically powerful action – the specific narratives that we construct, communicate, and share with others not only reaffirms our commitment as a fan, but can carry with it an increased sense of self-satisfaction.

I remember when I was 10 years old on my family's annual summer trip to Minnesota. On the drive, my parents and grandparents would make numerous stops at gas stations and truck stops and on these pilgrimages I would usually try to pick up some sort of souvenir or toy to make the time pass more quickly. On this particular trip I remember walking into a gas station somewhere in Wisconsin and my attention was drawn to a wire spindle rack of comic books. I never had any interest in reading comic books before then – I did not care for youth-oriented comics like *Archie*, nor did I really understand the appeal of superhero titles like *X-Men* or *Superman*. My attention was drawn not to the spandex-clad muscular heroes but to a spiky-haired biker who was fighting aliens on the cover of the comic book. The title, *Lobo*, was about an intergalactic bounty-hunter who rode around on his huge motorcycle and acted as a mercenary ridding planets of evil villains. I was immediately hooked. While I was not a motorcycle or bike fan, it was the art and serialized storytelling format that unfolded month-by-month that sparked my interest. I remember grabbing a couple issues of the comic and it was not long down the highway before I had finished those issues and began asking my dad to stop at another gas station so I could buy some more. And buy more I did. I picked up additional titles like *Spirits*

of Vengeance which featured Marvel characters like Venom and Ghost Rider, as well as a few issues of *Punisher*; all of which were new worlds that I was exploring and quickly becoming deeply absorbed within. The sequential storytelling, captivating art, and the “to-be-continued” endings kept me hooked and craving more. Unlike many passing fads we might try during adolescence, comic books have stayed with me and have been a constant in my life.

As the years passed, I began to frequent my local comic book store and would request subscriptions to certain titles that would be held each month when they were released. In high school, I attended my first comic book convention in Rosemont, Illinois and I experienced thousands of other fans waiting to meet their favorite writer/artist, purchasing comic books or collecting original art from their favorite series. Comic books provided me with not only an outlet to escape into, but a place to talk with other people about similar interests. Access to the Internet provided a new avenue to communicate with other comic book fans around the world on discussion boards. There were other people just like me out there, and with the simple click of a mouse, I could connect with them and describe my convention experiences. In 2004, I created my own website where I publicly shared my original comic book artwork collection with others who appreciated art as much as I did. When I graduated from high school, I did not want a used car or a stereo system. I wanted a trip to San Diego to attend the largest pop culture event in the world: Comic-Con. Hello, my name is Jeremy Adolphson, and I am a comic book fan.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview to the various theoretical perspectives that I engage with in my analysis of fan interactions on *Talking Dead*. To study the fandom of *The Walking Dead*, I draw upon three rhetorical perspectives: 1) constitutive rhetoric (how fans constitute their identities and how the television show constitutes a particular identity); 2) theories of decorum; and 3) disciplinary rhetoric. I argue that these three approaches, while

distinct, are interrelated in better assessing the behaviors, narratives, and actions of fans expressing their fandom using social media. Along with these three approaches, I introduce the larger concept of social support, in particular mediated social support, and how fandom, at large, serves as a context for sharing and caring about individuals who have similar mindsets, ideas, and values about the television show. This chapter provides more than a summary of these theories; throughout, I contextualize parallels to the scholarly literature on fan studies to provide a rationale for the argument that we should study fans using these perspectives.

The Ideological Dimensions of Constitutive Rhetoric

In my dissertation, I argue that the television show *Talking Dead* rhetorically constitutes a specific fan identity by making certain rhetorical options available to those who wish to participate according to the show's guidelines, while also creating significant barriers for other rhetorical options for participation that are less in line with the show's guidelines. Additionally, fans also constitute their fandom by engaging in a wide variety of discussions to reaffirm themselves as serious fans on popular social media websites. These two distinct narratives (fan-driven conversations via social media and the produced discourse and fan narratives on *Talking Dead*) both contribute to that which collectively makes up the community of digital fans of *The Walking Dead* television show. I draw this in part from how Booth (2012) describes fans:

I refer to the social grouping of individuals with shared interests, joined together through some form of mechanism of membership; the self-selected organization of a group of fans who both enjoy an extant media object, and who create additional content about that media object (p. 22).

Fan practices are not new; however, the technological changes afforded by the popularity of social media have created a unique opportunity to evaluate the rhetoric produced by and about

these collective individuals in this new arena. Booth continues that digital fans are not reinventing the wheel, but “both influence and are influenced by technology not just as tools but also as necessary and catalytic mechanisms to alter their subjective experiences of cultural life” (p. 39). Television shows like *Talking Dead* are utilizing social media to enhance the level of connectedness for those fans that choose that type of immersive experience, and it is worth analyzing and assessing how fan rhetoric reacts to this utilization.

Back in 2007, media scholar Henry Jenkins seemingly envisioned the type of fandom in which we now find ourselves, including its cultural and economic impact:

Fan tastes are ruling at the box office (witness all of the superhero and fantasy blockbusters of recent years); where fan tastes are dominating television; where fan practices are shaping the game industry. Indeed, many media analysts believe that these communities of prosumers, multipliers, loyals, influencers, fans, will play an even greater role in the future as people begin to explore the use of video iPod as a distribution channel for media content and as people begin to talk about something fans have been promoting at least since the 1980s – subscription-based models for supporting the production and distribution of cult television series (pp. 359-360).

In our current mediascape, we should be analyzing not only the rhetoric produced by fans, but also how various media are providing an opportunity to heighten this level of engagement by communicating more directly to fans. To help make this claim, I begin by discussing Maurice Charland’s (1987) theory of constitutive rhetoric and how this theory can benefit studying fandom.

Charland (1987) acknowledges that viewing rhetoric just as persuasion “cannot account for the audiences that rhetoric addresses” (p. 134). Constitutive rhetoric provides an alternative

approach to rhetoric as persuasion – one that stresses an ideological dimension. In the conclusion to his seminal essay, Charland stresses the flexibility of applying ideological criticism to more than overtly political texts: “Ideological rhetorical practice is not restricted to explicitly political public address, but can include a range of aesthetic practices, including music, drama, architecture, and fashion, that elicit new modes of experience and being” (p. 148). Recent scholarship in Communication Studies (e.g., Dougherty, 2015; Perry & Long, 2016; Samek, 2015) heeds Charland’s call, applying the theory of constitutive rhetoric and ideological criticism to many diverse texts. My dissertation takes up this call as well, by analyzing the discourse produced through social media as a continuation and extension of constitutive rhetoric. By focusing on fandom as an ideological and rhetorical construction of one’s identity, I use the theory of constitutive rhetoric to uncover both the strategies that fans employ as well as the discourse produced through and around the televised broadcast to depict fandom in the 21st century.

Charland’s theory seeks to address how an individual’s subject position can lead to a particular ideological identity. Charland draws upon the works of earlier rhetoricians and philosophers to establish the foundation of the theory. One of the primary influences on his work was Kenneth Burke’s concept of *identification*. Identification, for Burke, is something that exists prior to persuasion. In his book *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke (1969) equates identification with the idea of consubstantiality: “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus, he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another” (p. 21). Burke sought to establish through the doctrine of consubstantiality that individuals either explicitly or implicitly identify with others – by “having common sensations, concepts, images,

ideas, attitudes that make them consubstantial” (p. 21). Drawing from the ideas of Kenneth Burke’s theory on identification, Charland (1987) posits that an audience member “participates in the very discourse by which they would be persuaded – audiences would [begin to] embody a discourse” (p. 133). There are admittedly different levels of participation – from a feeling that you are the intended audience to more of an active account of producing and contributing content. In my dissertation, I am more concerned with the active element of fandom that is afforded by the opportunities that social media provides. In other words, I am not interested in those people who identify as fans of *The Walking Dead* but who live in that fandom apart from social media. Rather, I am interested mostly in *The Walking Dead* fans who actively live their fandom through their engagement with social media, specifically that which relates to *Talking Dead*. It is how these people constitute and are constituted by the specific fan rhetoric related to *Talking Dead* that will serve as my primary line of inquiry for this dissertation.

Constitutive rhetoric posits that individuals are called to identify with particular rhetorical narratives and that once successfully brought in, these identities become strengthened through discourse. The theory is not about the agency of the audience, but rather who the audience become rhetorically and through the rhetoric as it is being articulated. The rhetoric invents the audience and does not just reach out to them; therefore, the rhetorical process of constituting is an active one. Take for example my own integration into comic book fandom as a child from the introduction section of this chapter. I was initially brought in by the artwork that was depicted on the cover of the comic book, causing me to pick up the book – but it was the larger story that unfolded monthly that not only persuaded me to purchase the comic book, but to continue on with the stories and subscribe to future issues. The larger question of “how” we get into things that we like is very much rhetorical because these texts precede the fandom of the text. While the

reasons we get involved in a particular fandom varies from person-to-person, it is the active process of identifying and sustaining that identification that opens up numerous rhetorical possibilities. Charland proposes that “all narratives...are ideological, because they occult the importance of discourse, culture and history into giving rise to subjectivity [and that] subjectivity is always social, constituted in language, and exists in a delicate balance of contradictory drives and impulses” (p. 139). But narratives change given the context and culture with which they exist. It is in the narratives that fans tell each other, and the narratives communicated by AMC and their show *Talking Dead* that contribute to what makes an engaged fan.

We are all part of multiple subject positions or narratives in our lives, and much like the various narratives of fans, they can change:

Our first subject positions are modest, linked to our name, our family, and our sex. As we enter the adult world, they become more complex, as different constitutive rhetoric reposition us with respect to such formal and informal institutions as the state, the economy, the church and the school. Thus, though we are subjects through language, and indeed can only speak as subjects, our subjectivity and ideological commitments are not fixed at our first utterance... [Our] particular subject positions can undergo transformations (p. 147).

In order to enhance the importance of rhetorical discourse, Charland draws upon Althusser’s idea of interpellation, to suggest how individuals are called as subjects in a particular ideology.

Charland highlights that “interpellation occurs at the very moment that one enters into a rhetorical situation, that is, as soon as an individual recognizes and acknowledges being addressed” (Charland, p. 138). By being interpellated, individuals/audiences/subjects begin to accept a greater sense of self-understanding about their role and sense of identity in a particular

discourse. According to Charland, Althusser's hailing is a rhetorical act that is prior to the narrative, thus "one must already be an interpellated subject and exist as a discursive position in order to be part of the audience of a rhetorical situation in which persuasion could occur" (p. 138). While Charland mentions Althusser's idea of interpellation, it is important to note that the process is different from rhetorical persuasion because the act of being interpellated is straightforward; either one is called (or hailed) or not. Rhetorical persuasion does not rest on a single instance of hailing, but rather develops over time and through layered strategies.

Charland's case study of Quebecois people focused on a White Paper, as the rhetorical text, which served as a narrative account on the history of the Quebecois. The document served to constitute a public and people that were politically separate from Canada. Charland provides a justification for the importance of the White Paper as an important document of constitutive rhetoric:

While some might consider the White Paper to be a rhetorical failure because less than half of Quebec's French-speaking population opted for independence, the outcome of the Referendum reveals that its constitutive rhetoric was particularly powerful. This rhetoric, which presents those in Quebec as Quebecois requiring and deserving their own state, constituted at least close to half of Quebec voters such that they, as an audience, were not really Canadians (p. 135).

Through the White Paper, Charland sought to investigate how the Quebecois were rhetorically positioned within the text. The Quebecois people in the White Paper existed solely in the realm of the text, and Charland identified that if it was not for the existence of the ideological subject of the Quebecois, "their sovereignty would not be constituted as a natural or necessary way of life" (p. 137). For Charland, it was this rhetoric that created a new identity through language,

which people desired to embody. But for this to work, those desiring this new identity (the Quebecois) had to do so according to the terms of the rhetoric.

The collective identity of a specified group depends upon rhetoric, and exists only through the discourse that constitutes them. To help recognize the constitutive function of these groups, Charland proposed three main ideological effects. The first ideological effect is the constituting of a collective subject (p.139). In order for someone to create a narrative about a group of people there must be a collective subject (e.g., the Quebecois *peuple*, fans). The second ideological effect posits the creation of a transhistorical subject, commonly denoted by the shared pronoun “our” and suggests that the constituted identity “transcends the limitations of individuality at any historical moment and transcends the death of individuals across history” (p. 140). The third ideological effect is the illusion of freedom. For Charland freedom is merely an illusion because the narrative has already been spoken or written. The constituted subjects “must be true to the motives through which the narrative constitutes them, and thus which presents characters as freely acting toward a predetermined and fixed ending” (p. 141).

Charland offers a two-step process for constitutive rhetoric to work. First, the above-mentioned ideological effects are predicated upon the successful interpellation of the audience members. Second, because constitutive rhetoric requires action in the material world, the theory holds that “its embodied subjects act freely in the social world to affirm their subject position” (p. 141). Constitutive rhetoric does not function as persuasion because the subject/audience member is “always already”, rather, the process is “akin more to one of conversion that ultimately results in an act of recognition of the rightness of a discourse and of one’s identity with its reconfigured subject position” (p. 141). Because constitutive rhetoric is more action-oriented, rhetorical critics turn toward the discourse to uncover the ideological narratives of

particular audiences. For constitutive rhetoric to successfully work, the assumption is that audiences live inside these rhetorical narratives: “Indeed, from the moment they enter into the world of language, they are subjects; the very moment of recognition of an address constitutes an entry into a subject position to which inheres a set of motives that render a rhetorical discourse intelligible” (p. 147). The following section incorporates scholarship in fan studies to craft a justification as to why constitutive rhetoric is an appropriate tool in analyzing the types of fandom upon which I focus in this dissertation.

Constituting the Fan – Approaches and Justifications

The theory of constitutive rhetoric has been applied to a variety of cultural texts, artifacts, and ideologies: from advertisements (Stein, 2002), feminist thought (Tate, 2005), political discourse (Melling, 2013; Sweet & McCue-Enser, 2010; Zagacki, 2007), conceptions of race (Leff & Utley, 2004), childless women (Hayden, 2011), historical accounts of sovereignty (Mills 2014) and even the constitutive narratives from a fictional novel (Goehring & Dionisopoulos, 2013). Little scholarly attention, however, has directly linked fan studies with constitutive rhetoric. While the existing literature is sparse, fan scholars have discussed elements as they relate to Charland’s ideological effects. As a reminder, the first ideological effect describes constituting a collective subject – through which, in fan scholarship, a number of parallels emerge: the desire for social acceptance among fans (Jenkins, 1992), the intrinsic component of fandom (Sandvoss, 2005), being knowledgeable about technology to promote fandom (Hillman, Procyk, & Neustaedter 2014; Mittell, 2009), and finally with the called-upon identity of the anti-fan (Theodoropoulou, 2007). The second ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric posits a transhistorical subject that can exist across history. The transhistorical subject in this rhetoric creates an opportunity for someone to become a fan in a way that is not competitive or hostile.

Thus, discussions of authenticity for feeling like a fan should not be based on being a fan of a particular cultural text from day one.

Consider for example someone who just began watching the HBO series *Game of Thrones*, and spent all weekend binge-watching the series and then stayed up all night reading the various blogs and comments on social media forums like Reddit. At work the following day this individual acts like they have been a fan since the first airing of the series. While this is a fictional anecdote, it is possible because the identity has a transhistorical rhetoric that allows that kind of participation. While diehard fans may question the authenticity of this newfound fandom it does not matter as long as they personally identify themselves as a *Game of Thrones* fan. We cannot discount the rhetorical possibilities of this identity. For all intents and purposes, the fan who recently-binge watched all of *Game of Thrones* is afforded a transhistorical fan identity without the competitiveness or arguments that may stem from positions of who is a more authentic fan. Finally, the third ideological effect is geared towards material action whereby individuals actively constitute their identity. In the fan studies literature, there is research, including an entire issue of *Transformative Works and Cultures*⁴, that identifies various iterations of fan activism through analyzing case studies of fans organizing to bring back or save their favorite show from cancellation (e.g., Chin 2014; Kligler-Vilenchik, McVeigh-Schultz, Weitbrecht, & Tokuhama, 2012).

The First Ideological Effect

Fandom, according to Matt Hills (2002) is something that always is everywhere all of the time. The concept of the fan is greater than the sum of its parts, meaning that at any given time,

⁴ Volume 10 (2012) of the online journal *Transformative Works and Cultures* is centered along the theme of fan activism, featuring an editorial by the journal's editors Henry Jenkins and Sangita Shresthova assessing both the power and potential for fan activism.

an individual may choose to like or support something (e.g., The Green Bay Packers). Prior to the individual becoming a fan, there were fans of that football team; and there is near certainty that there will likely be fans of the same team after any given individual fan is no longer present. I realize that this is speculation, something that fans especially enjoy partaking in, but to put it into language from Charland, the collective subject of the fan “transcends the limitation of the individual body and will” (p. 139). Henry Jenkins (1992) notes the desirability for fans to find other likeminded individuals: “Fans tend to focus their social and cultural activity around programs with the potential of being accepted by sizeable numbers of other fans” (p. 91). On one hand, fan conventions provide an ideal space where individuals from across the globe can gather together to celebrate all things related to their object of affinity (e.g., *Harry Potter*, *Star Trek*, or *My Little Pony*), but such conventions lack a consistency to proudly act on fandom. Fan conventions during the time that Jenkins was writing *Textual Poachers* were geographically limited in terms of the frequency with which fans could interact. Granted, there are other venues where fans can gather to produce, consume, and speculate about their given fandom: creatively writing fan fiction – where the authors incorporate familiar characters from their text and create supplemental adventures/scenarios through which they can interact; producing or writing fan zines dedicated to a given fandom; or through the participation in online discussion boards. Regardless, fans have a variety of discursive spaces to enact their fandom, but each of those spaces has their own rules and identities.

Scholars like Cornel Sandvoss (2005) interrogate the concept of interpellation further by looking inwards toward the self. One’s object of fandom is not simply seen in relation to the self but is actually part of the self: “The object of fandom...is intrinsically interwoven with our sense of self, with who we are, would like to be, and think we are” (p. 96). Success and commitment

of the fan, for Sandvoss, relates to the degree with which the object becomes part of the self. This type of reasoning very much aligns with Charland's first ideological effect.

Other parallels stemming from the first ideological effect arise in making sense of using the technology for fan production – namely that of successfully knowing how to navigate social media platforms like Tumblr and Wikis. Fans, especially those who want a greater sense of engagement with their material, must become proficient in making sense with the various platforms. Hillman et al. (2014) chose to look at fan's experience navigating Tumblr, a microblogging platform that allows users to upload text, video, and audio, and found that there took a certain degree of knowledge about the technology prior to accessing the fan content. According to these authors:

This aspect of fuzziness made it difficult to find fandoms and know what constituted content within a fandom. New users explained that it was difficult to find fandoms that were of interest to them because they could not just simply search for a TV show name. They had to instead understand what hashtags were associated with a show, or actively search out other Tumblr users who blogged about the show (p. 4).

While this may be considered a barrier to some to fully access other fan sites, those who regularly checked Tumblr pages (e.g., dashboards) “described their interactions with a fandom in terms of ‘always-on’ technology” (p. 5). An additional barrier that needs to be addressed with regards to Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit or any other platform is the successful negotiation of the space by understanding the vernacular with each technology. Likewise, Mittell (2009), in his exploration wiki of the television show *Lost* stated that “fan wikis provide a tremendous resource for scholars to observe a fan community reflecting on its own practices, making the metadiscussions of fandom transparent and accessible to all who know where to look” (p. 6).

A final aspect of Charland's first ideological effect comes into play with the idea of positive and negative identification. In *Communication*, Mills (2014) applies constitutive rhetoric through the lens of negative identification by analyzing the 19th century legal and political texts surrounding piracy and anti-sovereignty. Mills distinguishes between two types of identification in which individuals come to be constituted: positive and negative identification. For positive identification "an interpellated subject identifies with a set of characteristics that are positively enclosed within the identity offered by the text" (p.114). As a counterpoint, negative identification positions the identity against one another through an antagonistic relationship. Scholars like Mills argue that "attending to the dialectic of positivity and negativity within constitutive rhetoric opens up new sites of inquiry that extend beyond initial constitutive moments" (p. 129). For fan scholarship, positive and negative identification arises with the classification of anti-fans.

An anti-fan is a specific type of fan that has an intense dislike or hatred for a chosen text, artifact, music, etc. Individuals subscribing to a particular text, be it *Star Wars* vs. *Star Trek*, Marvel vs. DC, CNN vs. Fox News, pledge their allegiance to their given fandom. Oftentimes the hatred one expresses towards a cultural text lies in the fact that "this object is in direct, straightforward, or historical competition with her/his own object of admiration" (Theodoropoulou, 2007, p. 318). The anti-fan is still a fan because they have been successfully integrated into their narratives about their prized object, but their vociferous hatred towards all things that could possibly threaten it, produces narratives with which other anti-fans can coalesce around. Theodoropoulou selected football fandom and the anti-fan sentiments found in two rival clubs in Greece. The classification and rhetoric produced from the anti-fan aligns with Mills' discussion of negative identification – continuing an antagonistic relationship against other

competing fandom while simultaneously strengthening and reaffirming their own fandom. To summarize, Charland's first ideological effect posits the constituting of a collective subject that is found ideologically in those particular narratives. These collective subjects, be it fans or Charlands' Quebecois, transcend the individual contributions in order to represent larger rhetorical and ideological narratives.

The Second and Third Ideological Effects

Communication scholarship that explicitly discusses Charland's second ideological effect has been largely focused on political texts. For example, Drzewiecka (2002) draws upon Charland's the transhistorical subject, by focusing on the collective pronoun "we" found within the texts describing the Polish diasporic identity to articulate how the "borders and who counts as its members are constantly contested and repositioned" (p. 2). Using articles and editorials published in the weekend editions of the Polish American newspaper *Dziennik Zwiazkowy*, Drzewiecka identified themes that represented the diasporic identity. The Polish American diasporic identity, positioned against others, helps further the process of constitutive rhetoric. Drzewiecka's article explained how the theory could be used to help to constitute a new identity from a dispersed group who long to achieve recognition and power that they rightfully feel should be theirs. While Drzewiecka focused more upon the political identity of Polish Americans, Charland's transhistorical subject can be mapped onto fan studies.

Charland's second ideological effect forwards a transhistorical subject whereby the individual fan becomes part of a much larger entity – where the rhetoric produced uses terms like "our show" or "our fans are the best". The collective power of feeling passionately about their text is an area in fan scholarship that parallels the second ideological effect. Booth (2014) notes the power that pathos has for fans to completely immerse themselves in a given fan-narrative.

For franchises like *The Walking Dead*, Booth notes that there are many ancillary products that further expand the narrative universe of the show – and companies are targeting fans through emotional appeals to get them to purchase board games, graphic novels, and video games related to the series. As I noted in the previous chapter, scholars like Booth argue that we are living in an age of transgenic media whereby the spread of information is dispersed across multiple media channels. This is an important concept for fans, because in order to get additional information about their characters/stories fans will be more likely to then buy additional products to see how these narratives play out, or at least tide them over until the next episode or the new season begins.

Charland notes that constitutive rhetoric must be oriented towards action, his third ideological effect, and we can see this pursuit of fan activism in our current media-driven economy through organized and sustained Internet fan campaigns. The emotional attachment fans have toward their text can clearly be seen in the various ways that fans can enjoy it (e.g., reading a book tie-in, playing a board game about the television show). While television shows like *Talking Dead* are not for everyone, it requires a certain type of fan to participate in a more-immersed environment than the casual viewer of the series. The contemporary rhetorical landscape that is available for fans provides various access points and degrees of involvement that seem designed to connote the level of seriousness in their actions. One such example that highlights a hierarchical notion of fandom has been the use of websites like Kickstarter. Fans are passionate about their cultural text – this much is true – and their emotional attachment, or pathos appeals, can also be observed in the level of dedication that they have in wanting to help

save their show from cancellation. The rise and popularity of crowd funded campaigns like Kickstarter⁵ builds the bridge between the second and third ideological effect.

For those fans that accept the scale that Kickstarter provides, the levels and parameters of fandom are rhetorically defined in the specific campaign through the levels that individual backers pledge. Campaigns run by Kickstarter provide incentives for fans who contribute money towards whatever creative project is being proposed. The exclusive rewards and incentives increase as more money is donated. This process is constitutive because Kickstarter calls upon certain fans to participate in the narratives by donating money. Individuals, after having been solicited to support a particular campaign, can identify the level of “fan” they wish to publicly exude. We can begin to see that these complexities help create new rhetorical opportunities for defining and studying fandom.

One of the most popular and successful Kickstarter campaigns over the past few years was the *Veronica Mars* campaign. The goal for the Kickstarter was to solicit donations from fans to release a film to conclude the television series by providing a sense of closure for the fans and their beloved characters after the television series was cancelled. The extra content, perks and exclusive merchandise mattered only to a specific type of *Veronica Mars* fan that subscribed and supported this scale of fandom. Those fans flooded the campaign and went on to raise \$5 million, \$3 million more than their initial goal. I personally witnessed the constitutive function of fandom via Kickstarter by observing a friend contribute money towards the *Veronica Mars* campaign. Once the campaign was launched, she immediately disregarded the lower tiered incentive

⁵ Kickstarter was launched in 2009 as a means to fund various creative projects in music, technology, film, comic books, etc. Each campaign is available for a pre-determined length of time in which individuals are able to pledge their level of support for the project. The amount of money pledged often equates to a certain tier by which patrons are given either supplementary materials or privileged access to the campaign as it nears completion. Once a project has been funded, backers are notified via e-mail and their credit card is charged. If a project is not funded, the patrons are not charged for their projected pledge and none of the rewards are sent to backers.

packages and opted instead for donating a mid-range package of a few hundred dollars to acquire an autographed movie poster. The decisions made not only by my friend, but other backers are very much rhetorical in nature. They publicly backed a campaign by asserting their commitment to their fandom based upon a specific price range. Crowd funding campaigns like Kickstarter have highlighted the hierarchical nature of fandom – not only equating levels of support in terms of financial contributions, but interjecting a self-serving rationale to brag or boast their “degree” of fandom by publicly displaying their rewards (from wearing a sticker saying “I Saved Veronica Mars on Kickstarter”, to framing the movie poster, to using social media to tweet about what they pledged).

What we have seen with fan-driven campaigns like Kickstarter is very divisive. On one hand, there is evidence that degrees of fandom can be quantified in terms of the amount of money donated. On the other hand, there are those who feel that they should not have to pay additional money to reassert their fandom, nor do they wish to view others based upon that scale. My dissertation centers on how new rhetorics of fandom create new understanding of fans and fandom. The Kickstarter example provides a snapshot of the ways in which changes in communication technologies influence our rhetorical landscape, but does not issue a ruling on who is or is not a fan. What crowd funding websites like Kickstarter have done is to introduce new sets of questions by giving an individual the opportunity to fund or not fund a particular project. The effect of these options can be seen rhetorically with the ways in which individuals respond. To summarize, the importance of this current *Talking Dead* study centers on how the fans react to, respond to, and talk about their fandom. Finally, Charland’s three ideological effects suggest a collective, transhistorical, and active population that can be identified through their rhetorical narratives.

Constituting Decorum – Maintaining Appropriateness

An additional theoretical approach that I use in my dissertation relates to the concept of decorum. This concept has been studied from times of antiquity to more recent conceptualizations, and in this section I highlight elements of indecorous speech to suggest the flexibility of standards placed on certain rhetorical interactions. After my discussion on decorum, I situate the concept in the literature on fan studies as it centers on the act of spoiling.

Spoiling, described as intentionally or unintentionally revealing key plot elements, can cause immense frustration, anger, and hatred directed toward those individuals who disregard the informal codes of conduct for fans in speculating or discussing a fan text. Consider the complex landscape of modern fandom: It had become increasingly difficult to avoid all spoilers when I lived on the West Coast because the programs had already aired in the Central and Eastern time zones. In the Internet age, individuals need to tread carefully, especially depending on geographic location, as people are eager to go online and begin discussing or theorizing what they just watched. Posting on social media produces a sense of gratification, and having the knowledge that others in different time zones do not possess creates possible challenges for individuals who do not wish for their experience to be ruined. These types of negotiations would not be possible, or at least as public, without the increased use of wireless communication technologies.

For example, I try to avoid spoilers on television shows or films that I plan to watch, and I actively attempt to prevent exposure to information that would ruin my viewing experience. In 2009 the film *Orphan* was released and I was intrigued to see the movie in a theater. On the film's opening weekend, I logged onto Facebook and while browsing I found a post near the top of my newsfeed from a friend who did not just give his summary of the film; he began his

comment by revealing the twist ending. Needless to say I was upset. Not only did he give a point-by-point summary of the film, he spoiled the twist in the film's ending rather than warning his Facebook friends about his disclosure of the surprise ending. It is instances like this that highlight the potentially invasive nature of spoilers. I begin my discussion with the concept of decorum as a type of indecorous speech and will then transition to spoiling as a form of indecorous speech. I conclude this section with a discussion on ways in which individuals enforce codes of conduct online, which will then segue into the final section on disciplinary forms of rhetoric. Important for this contextualization to work is that it must be centered on the group or individual's own rhetoric. For social media websites like Reddit and AMC's guidelines for submitting content to *Talking Dead*, they need to clearly demonstrate a sense of decorum in which spoilers are treated negatively. There is a function to that decorum in that administrators or moderators should work to police those posts that violate the established code of conduct.

One way to identify what would count as decorous rhetoric would be to approach the concept from the opposite side: namely, by highlighting those instances of indecorous, uncivil communication or scatological rhetoric. Within the rhetorical scholarship, two exemplars of indecorous speech stand out: 1) Windt's (1972) essay on the diatribe, and 2) Campbell's (1973) essay on the rhetoric of women's lib. Both essays look at historically contextualized situations where individuals purposefully used language in obscene and indecorous ways for a particular purpose. First, the diatribe, as an example of indecorous rhetoric, inspired the Yippies, who, in the 1960s/1970s, felt out of place and alienated from society at large. Windt describes the diatribe as a "moral dramaturgy intended to assault sensibilities, to turn thought upside down, to turn social mores inside out, to commit in language the very same barbarisms one condemns in society" (Windt, 1972, pp. 7-8). Groups such as the Yippies used the rhetorical genre of the

diatribe to point out the hypocrisies of Vietnam-era America. Likewise, in similar fashion, Campbell's essay on the rhetoric of women's liberation analyzed how historically, rules of decorum often kept women in their socially-accepted "appropriate" place by disciplining certain types of behavior. Campbell notes that, historically, women's voices were labeled as indecorous and that women's lib rhetoric must be confrontational in order to distinguish them apart from the patriarchal rules in society (Campbell, 1973, pp. 81-82). These two examples in the scholarship of rhetorical studies illustrate that indecorous speech is contextually situated and constantly in flux – depending upon how it is measured.

Decorum is an interpretive process that maintains flexible standards of evaluation (Deem, 1995; Hariman, 1992). Decorum, as a rhetorical style, describes both the audience and the credibility of that person speaking. Because of the flexible standards of decorum, we need to be mindful of the context within which the rhetoric is presented. The classical definition of decorum states: "In an oration, as in life, nothing is harder than to determine what is appropriate. The Greeks call it *to prepon*; let us call it decorum or propriety. The universal rule, in oratory and life, is to consider propriety" (Cicero, cited in Jasinski, 2001, p. 147). Hariman (1992) describes how classical viewpoints of decorum "provided both the major stylistic code for verbal composition and the social knowledge required for political success" (p. 152). Kapust (2011) takes up Cicero's rhetorical virtue of decorum, particularly in trying to determine the flexibility of appropriateness or inappropriateness depending on the situation:

Those who best achieve propriety in speaking must understand the subject of their speech, along with their own character and the character of their audience...Understanding decorum, then, involved understanding that an audience constrained even the ideal orator; the orator was in a situation requiring balance between

assertion and deference, virtue and virtuosity, or similar elements of the art of persuasion (p. 98).

A rhetorical sense of decorum stresses the need for both audiences and speakers to adapt their style, content, and emotions to the larger situation. The flexibility and subjectivity of the rules of decorum for fans resides in the group/website defining and enforcing those comments that violate the space given the norms and rules established for that particular group or website.

Gray and Mittell (2007) discuss the politics of spoilers for fans in their analysis of the television show *Lost*. These authors acknowledge the growing number of spoiler websites that promise exclusive insider information about upcoming episodes that have been culled together from reliable sources. For example, on *Talking Dead*, the host will attempt to head-off any mention of spoiler comments that guests may bring up during the broadcast. This is both AMC and *Talking Dead's* decorum being enacted rhetorically. These warnings usually are enough to bring the conversation back to that week's episode and maintain the decorum appropriate to the format and content of the show.

Everyday spoilers demand some indication or warning that key information will be revealed through the words "SPOILER WARNING" or through cloaking individual posts on Reddit that require the individual user to scroll their cursor over the information that they willingly choose to look at (Hassoun, 2013; Williams, 2004). *The Walking Dead* subReddit provides the how-to steps to make possible spoiler posts invisible unless the comment is clicked on. Though not everyone subscribes to the etiquette online (referred to as netiquette), as Gray and Mittell acknowledge, "While spoilers have spoiler fans, they also spread virally, spoiling non-spoiler fans and forcing advance information upon them; hence, their relevance extends well beyond the Internet enclaves that tend to circulate and even research them" (p. 4). Even though

there are separate spaces for the spoilers to be revealed, it becomes difficult to police or monitor the content on these websites. Spoilers are but one avenue as to why decorum matters in a rhetorical analysis of *Talking Dead* fans.

Robert Hariman (1992) sought to revitalize the theory of decorum by extending its use in the analysis of power. Hariman states that “decorum can be seen both as the rule that one should always behave in certain ways and the means by which people negotiate how they should behave in response to new and troubling circumstances... decorum marks the tension between public display and personal nuance that is central to all social experience and to important elements of political meaning” (p. 163). Hariman argues that the study of decorum should not be about the exemplar or most explicit examples, rather, “to the extent that power is constituted by processes of communication, every political act requires a political culture that can be identified in part by its rules for appropriate communication” (p. 163). While Hariman specifically addressed political interactions, his focus on the everyday micro-processes of power provide a greater flexibility to analyze not just what was said but the reaction and results of the interaction, and this can best be seen in how fans on discussion boards used surveillance to self-impose the rules for those who disregard appropriate netiquette. For example, Bennett (2011) looked at the online forum of Murmurs, fans of the alternative rock band R.E.M., by looking at the strategies that fans used to self-impose governance in the forums to delegitimize those users who strayed from the acceptable topics.

Fans, in general, conform to appropriate codes of conduct in online and face-to-face situations, especially when their behavior was rewarded. In the case of *Talking Dead*, fan comments on social media that engage the source material (e.g., that week’s episode of *The Walking Dead*, questions concerning character development, or theories about where the series

will go) have a greater chance of being discussed, if not selected for broadcast, than with other fans on the discussion boards. These unwritten rules of appropriate conduct have usually been carried out by guests on the six seasons of *Talking Dead*, with the exception of a few notable cases discussed in Chapter 4. Decorum, which thus far has been viewed as a rhetorical tool, provides a useful way to study the narratives produced by fans. However, rules and netiquette do not always hold – and other sanctions need to be imposed. The next section of this chapter will discuss the concept of rhetorical disciplining to assess the role of discursive power in rhetorical transactions.

Rhetorical Disciplining

Michel Foucault (1978), in *The History of Sexuality Volume 1*, states: “Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (p. 93). This section outlines the theoretical components of rhetorical disciplining, and contextualizes the theory in fan studies. For Foucault, power is not just repressive, but in fact productive. As Foucault (1980) states in *Power/Knowledge*:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weight on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression (p.119).

Power, for Foucault, is present in everyday situations, and one site for observing power comes from fan-based interactions. De Kosnik (2008) stated that “the defining characteristic of

dominant fandoms as opposed to marginalized fandoms is not in fact numbers, but power” (p. 2). Dominant fandoms hold the power in terms of being able to alter content, broadcast information, or even just to control the flow of information. One such discrepancy, as I mentioned in the previous section, stems from the action of spoiling.

Spoiling, for some fans, becomes a token of power because of decorum. When someone establishes the rules, they create the condition of power. Spoilers “enable fans to accrue discursive fan power, as this practice is linked to knowledge and to enforcing fan discussions and ways of reading the text” (Williams, 2004, p. 6). The power comes from the community of fans that decided such actions are taboo. For certain spaces, however, the act of spoiling might be encouraged or welcomed, so we must consider the decorum of the fan community and their viewpoint on spoilers. Spoilers, or spoiling, as a form of disciplinary power is productive because it signifies knowledge, and having this knowledge can further the speculative nature of fandom.

Foucault’s work attempts to separate “thinking about power beyond the view of power as repression of the powerless by the powerful to an examination of the way that power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions” (Mills, 2003, p. 33). Consider for example the individual fan, seen through Charland’s framework of constitutive rhetoric. The fan is an active subject who operates under the illusion of freedom. One is free to choose from a predetermined set of options and resistances. The *Talking Dead* fan is free to contribute as long as what they say conforms to the regulations and rules established by AMC. Foucault first introduced his concept of disciplinary power in his book *Discipline and Punish*. Disciplinary power is a form of self-regulation that can consist of features such as “time-keeping, self-control over one’s posture and bodily functions, concentration, sublimation of immediate desires and

emotions” (Mills, 2003, p.43). Disciplinary actions have been seen in many social contexts such as schools, corporations, and prisons. The features and techniques of disciplinary power have transcended the school and prison that Foucault wrote about and has infiltrated many different segments of our society.

Disciplinary power works best with the real or perceived panoptic gaze. Foucault considers the panoptic gaze, as a form of surveillance, the eye of power, where “one is forced to act as if one is constantly being surveyed even when one is not” (Mills, 2003, p. 45). Originating as a type of prison structure, Foucault states that the panopticon “has a role of amplification; its aim is to strengthen the social forces – to increase production, to develop the economy, spread education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and to multiply” (Foucault, 1977, pp. 207-208). The key for the panopticon to work is for the individual/subject to internalize the gaze so that they now begin to self-discipline. Fans who post content online in message forums are under the watchful eye of surveillance mechanisms of other fans (Bennett, 2011) as well as the threat of legal action by large corporations issuing injunctions against fans who infringed upon copyrights (Johnson, 2007).

Foucault’s theory of power relations is rhetorically significant because one can study specific interactions and visual aspects to uncover and identify these local forms of power. There have been a variety of texts/sites where communication scholars have used a Foucauldian analysis of power: workplace organizations (Barker & Cheney, 1994), police security in Victorian journalism (Wendelin, 2010), surveillance and disciplinary power in media news (Andrejevic, 2002; Jordan, 2007; Norander, 2008), television reality shows (Shugart, 2006), and controversies surrounding public breastfeeding (Koerber, 2006). As a theoretical approach, disciplinary rhetoric provides a framework for analyzing both institutional and vernacular

narratives as it relates to fandom. The constitutive identity of fans provides examples of punitive and productive discourses of power.

In the final section of this chapter, I provide a rationale for the role that social support has for fans of *The Walking Dead*. Shows like *Talking Dead*, aside from allowing fans an increased opportunity to participate and connect directly with the creative-powers-that-be, allow for the shared space where fans can pay tribute to and process the range of emotions stemming from the fictional character death(s). AMC, *Talking Dead*, Hardwick, and the actors all contribute to providing fans with one final send-off to honor their on-screen memory and to say good-bye, officially, one final time.

The Role of Social Support in Fan Cultures

The fans of *The Walking Dead* are no strangers to experiencing the on-screen death(s) of their favorite character(s). Social support is defined by scholars as an umbrella term linking one's well-being to their relationships with others (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). Supportive communication helps manage uncertainty and increase perceptions of control regarding one's life (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987). In today's media landscape, fans now have multiple opportunities to not only express their sorrow and feelings regarding these fictional deaths, but with the aid of AMC's *Talking Dead*, they now have an official space to come together to grieve, mourn and process this sense of perceived loss. Chris Hardwick, host of *Talking Dead*, is able to help mediate the channels of supportive communication through his own narrative, the celebrity-guests-as-fans narratives, as well as the surprise guest of the evening - the actor/actress who played the recently deceased character – by offering up one final tribute to the fan community so they can heal and process the loss together. The subReddit forums provide a mediated space for likeminded fans to share their own narratives, epitaphs, and remembrances for the deceased

character. These targeted forums highlight the fans' dedication to the popular scripted series while reinforcing the communal ties that connect these nameless online screen names together: their love for all things *The Walking Dead*.

One field of research within social support that may prove a useful entry point to discussing the level of connection with fictional characters is parasocial relationships. According to Schiappa, Allen, and Gregg (2007), "a parasocial relationship is the perception of a television viewer of a relationship with someone known through the media" (p. 302). The authors attribute various reasons why persons end up perceiving these parasocial relationships; factoring in the role of fandom, one such reason stands out: "Persons could form such relationships simply because they enjoy television and find the relationships of the characters satisfying" (p. 303). The level of investment that fans of *The Walking Dead* feel toward characters on the show, along with the sense of loss experienced from their on-screen death, pervades the on-air discourse of *Talking Dead* as well as the subReddit forums. While they do not specifically address the on-screen death of a character, Schiappa et al. note in their results that "cancellation or loss of a television series is the loss of a relationship" (p. 311). The frequency with which *The Walking Dead* kills off their characters is bound to impact the fans' experience with grief and the loss of their beloved character(s). Supportive communication is an important component of fandom, as demonstrated on *Talking Dead* and the subReddit forums, and is further explored in Chapter 5.

In sum, this chapter has presented the three interrelated rhetorical perspectives that guide my dissertation research into fan identities. While my main thrust in this dissertation is to explore the constitutive rhetoric of fan-based actions in social media, these other two perspectives, disciplinary rhetoric and theories of decorum, provide a well-rounded analysis of how fans assert their sense of being a fan in an age of social media. Along with these rhetorical

perspectives, the role of supportive communication is an important aspect of fandom. Social support from a variety of agents (e.g., AMC, Chris Hardwick, celebrity guests, and online fans) contributes to the fandom of *The Walking Dead* and *Talking Dead* communities.

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Chapter 3 – Talking Talking Dead

“What if they published my fan letter?” When I was 15 years old, I was reading through one of my favorite comic books, *Cerebus*, and noticed that the last page of the issue was devoted to the letter column where fans had the opportunity to write to the creator with questions. At that age, I personally did not feel like I had anything mind-blowing to reveal, or any new insight that had not already appeared in the letter column page. So, I sat on this, and waited for my own opportunity to publicly engage more with my fandom. My definition of “engagement” also corresponded to my personal conceptualization of fandom, which contained the possibility for some type of public acknowledgement/reading of my letter from the creative powers-that-be, combined with the self-validation that was gained from seeing my fan letter published within the pages of a comic book.

I began attending comic book conventions around the Chicagoland area in 1998, and I met various artists/writers at the shows. As a consumer, I was able to purchase a variety of comic books and struck up conversations directly with the creators. One company that I met at the 1998 Wizard World Comic Book Convention in Rosemont Illinois was Crucial Comics, the publisher of the comic book *Rat Bastard*⁶. At the convention I purchased the first few issues of the comic and as a bonus, they ended up giving me some free stickers of the *Rat Bastard* logo. A few months later, I was watching the television program *Dharma & Greg* and much to my surprise, when the camera panned over to the kitchen fridge, I noticed that same *Rat Bastard* sticker that I had received that previous summer at the convention. I had my “in” - something that I hoped no one else saw. I immediately decided to write my first fan letter to Crucial Comics. In my letter, I discussed not only how much I enjoyed their comic, but that I saw their

⁶ *Rat Bastard* featured an anthropomorphic private investigator rat named Rosco Rodent who attempted to uncover a larger criminal conspiracy, film noir style, about issues related to human-animal genetic treatments.

sticker on *Dharma & Greg* and asked if they had seen it as well. About a month later at my local comic book store I purchased the most recent issue of the comic book *Rat Bastard* and I saw that they had indeed published my fan letter in their monthly letter column. I was overjoyed seeing my words appear in print and having the opportunity to communicate, even if only for a few sentences, with the creative powers-that-be working on the comic book. In terms of my published letter, I felt as though my voice was heard as a fan by those creatively responsible, but the opportunity to interact with other fans was limited given the format of the comic book letter column.

Introduction

It makes total sense to me that [*Talking Dead*] exists and I enjoy it. There are tons of people all over the internet on blogs and communities like this subReddit who talk about this stuff right after the show anyway, why not put it on camera for people to watch?
(Joeydyee, 2013)

Given today's multiple communication channels and technological interfaces where fans can interact with others, I provide in this chapter some rhetorical characteristics of those fans who submitted questions that were either read on the television show *Talking Dead*, or the fan-driven discussion found on the Reddit forums. The presentation and definition of fandom in our current digital age allows for a multiplicity of both channels and choices for fans to interact with their chosen text. As I argued in the previous chapter, incentive-based fan initiatives (e.g., Kickstarter campaigns) are beginning to gain traction in our contemporary media landscape among certain fans who equate their increased devotion to their fandom to the amount of money pledged for a certain campaign. The unique ways that fans choose to display their fandom are varied to be sure, but isolating the rhetorical messages of fans discussing their own fandom helps

isolate this conceptualization of fandom. Thinking through the ways in which fans seek validation from their objects of fandom, the purpose of this chapter is twofold: 1) to analyze how *Talking Dead* constitutes and cultivates a specific type of engaged fandom, and 2) to explore how those fans via social media discuss the characteristics that embody an engaged fan. Taking into consideration these two separate narratives, the official discourse from the televised broadcast of *Talking Dead* and the fan-based discourse found on Reddit, helps to inform the rhetorical classification of the engaged fan. *Talking Dead* fans represent a highly specialized subset of *The Walking Dead* fandom, but it is through their rhetoric that I can identify how much their usage and implementation of social media technology factors into their conceptualization and experience as fans. Moreover, not all fans subscribe to using social media in their viewing experience, nor do some fans find it necessary to even have a live after-show dedicated to *The Walking Dead* fandom. In order to account for this, I describe the rhetoric of the anti-*Talking Dead* fan, to highlight the exclusionary facet of Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric. Both fans and anti-fans, through their narratives, discuss compelling points that help to situate their place in the larger *The Walking Dead* fandom.

As I have already stated in this dissertation, some fans flock to social media websites to seek out additional material to consume related to their fandom. One such website that I have witnessed as a hub for *The Walking Dead* fans to interact is Reddit. Reddit is a social networking website created in 2005.⁷ While Reddit is similar to other social media platforms in terms of creating and responding to posts, it is unique in that registered users have the ability to rank/vote

⁷ As of October 2014, there have been over 175 million unique visitors to Reddit consisting of over 3.2 million registered users viewing over 6 billion pages (About Reddit, 2014). In October 2014, there were over 8,100 active subReddits whose group members cast over 21 million upward/downward votes. As an open source environment, Reddit users volunteer to moderate each subReddit while also contributing to and repairing the online community.

the posts to determine their position (upward/downward) as they appear on the screen. Reddit users (referred to as Redditors) “vote on which stories and discussions are important [so] the hottest stories rise to the top, while the cooler stories sink” (About Reddit, 2014). Reddit is a lively forum for fans to communicate with others and participate by displaying their fandom in multiple ways. Redditors select designated spaces to post their content across a variety of categories (e.g., such default categories include humor, technology, educational, Meta, entertainment). Similar to Twitter, Reddit allows users to contribute original posts (OP) or comments that link to external websites as the contribution relates to a particular forum’s topic. Fans of *The Walking Dead* can post content to two primary subReddits: r/thewalkingdead/ and r/thetalkingdead – the former is a larger forum for all elements of *The Walking Dead* franchise (e.g., comic books, toys, conventions, the TV show, and *Talking Dead*) while the latter is more specifically geared towards discussions generated from or in response to *Talking Dead*.

In this chapter I engage with a variety of texts in *The Walking Dead* fandom; but my analysis focuses specifically on two separate areas: 1) the fan-based comments on the subReddit forum “*The Walking Dead*” and, 2) the celebrity guest interactions on the broadcast of *Talking Dead*. As of September 2015, *The Walking Dead* subReddit forum has over 234,000 registered members and is the largest *The Walking Dead* community of fans found on Reddit (TheWalkingDead, 2015). Because of the size of this online community through archived discussion forums, I was able to access a variety of fan and anti-fan discourse of *The Walking Dead* and *Talking Dead* since *Talking Dead* first aired on AMC. In order to identify applicable characteristics of fandom, I ran a variety of search queries to target those discussions as they related to perceptions of fans and celebrity guests appearing on *Talking Dead* and the Reddit fans’ overall impressions of the show. I used these specific search queries to help isolate

comments specifically about *Talking Dead* rather than general comments about *The Walking Dead* fans. For example, acceptable comments include those that focus on the quality of the contributions the celebrity guests brought to *Talking Dead*, or how prepared they were when Chris Hardwick asked them episode-specific or larger mythology-based questions about *The Walking Dead*. Those posts and queries focusing more on personal attacks against AMC and Chris Hardwick for having “x” celebrity as a guest were not applicable to this current chapter’s framework. Instead, I sought out those comments and narratives that helped to compile those characteristics that would make up an ideally engaged fan.

I isolated the Reddit discussions on *The Walking Dead* subReddit centering on two particular episodes⁸ that will serve as exemplar case studies in order to determine the level of celebrity-fans-as-guest engagement that *Talking Dead* fans suggest as ideal via their rhetorical narratives. The fan-based discussions on the subReddit forums were overwhelming and elevated both Yvette Nicole Brown and Chris Jericho as ideal celebrity-fans-as-guests. Consider the following comment: “I love when Yvette is on Talking Dead. She is so insightful and sees all the symbolism they work so hard to put into the show and brings forth really great discussions” (Sonicink, 2016). Such comments across the multiple forums on the subReddit highlighted the

⁸ The two episodes of *Talking Dead* that I selected for case studies in this chapter were Season 2 Episode 7, with guests CM Punk and Yvette Nicole Brown, and Season 3 Episode 4, with guests Chris Jericho and Gillian Jacobs. Online websites offered praise for these guests. For example, the website *Hidden Remote* had this to say about Chris Jericho: “Chris Jericho is definitely a huge fan of *The Walking Dead* series...While on the show, Jericho didn’t just follow along with the conversation, he surprised us by bringing up previous moments on the show discussing interesting themes he noticed” (Qualey, 2016). The article continued by highlighting Yvette Nicole Brown as their number 1 overall choice as best guest on *Talking Dead*. Brown, the article summarized, “is basically the perfect *Talking Dead* guest. Just like most viewers of the program, she’s a super fan of the show and she even has an entire notebook devoted to her thoughts and musings on each twist and turn in the plot...She engages her fellow guests and the audience with her enthusiasm and light humor” (Qualey, 2016). Other online reviews highlighted praise for WWE TV personality CM Punk. On the online WWE wrestling blog *411 Mania*, the author praised CM Punk for his level of in-depth analysis which he brought to his episode as a guest: “Punk came off well informed on not just the televised series but also the comic it is based on...he also took the road less traveled, explaining why one of the show’s antagonists was within his rights to do someone really evil to one of the fan favorite cast members of the series” (Csonka, 2012).

inherent promise and potential stemming from these new discussion-based fan shows. In an article posted to the website *Hidden Remote*, author Erin Qualey (2016) discussed the importance for engaged guests on *Talking Dead* from the online *Walking Dead* fan community: “*The Walking Dead* community is very protective of their show, and they don’t like when guests come in who don’t seem to know what they are talking about. Even worse are the guests who are just there to plug their own projects. We want to see guests who take the job of dissecting each episode seriously”. In order to carry out my analysis in this chapter, I begin by outlining first the show’s origin and purpose paying particular attention towards AMC and their disclaimers for user-submitted content, along with general information and rules that users should adhere to for posting on Reddit. Afterward, I draw upon the fans’ rhetoric on the Reddit forum to explore the qualities and characteristics that contribute to constituting an engaged *The Walking Dead* fan. Next, I present my analysis of the two *Talking Dead* episodes that depict those desired qualities for the engaged celebrity-guest-as-fan, as found within the rhetoric of the *Talking Dead* fans. Finally, I focus on those anti-*Talking Dead* fans and how they rhetorically construct their fan identity by justifying their position within the larger *The Walking Dead* fandom.

Exploring Submission Requirements for *Talking Dead* and Reddit

Over the six seasons of *Talking Dead*, the show has expanded, not only in terms of length, but also the opportunities for fans to engage in the material. Starting with the mid-season premiere of the second season of *Talking Dead* (S02E09) the show’s format shifted from 30 minutes to a full hour to incorporate and accommodate more opportunities for discussion about the episode. While the use of polls⁹ and tweets differs from the standard format of the talk show,

⁹ The televised *Talking Dead* polls contain a multiple choice question directly related to the just-aired episode of *The Walking Dead* read by Hardwick near the end of the first segment of the show. After the poll question is read, the viewers have until the end of the broadcast to call and cast their vote determining the most popular answer. A typical poll segue drawn from Season 2 Episode 8 of *Talking Dead* proceeds as follows: “Our poll question this episode is:

this does not mean that *Talking Dead* fails to include more traditional elements of interaction. For example, starting with S02E09, audience members in the *Talking Dead* studio are able to ask questions directly to the guests on stage. By including the audience members, *Talking Dead* has shifted focus from the disembodied screen name online to an actual person who voices an opinion and asks a question during the live broadcast.

AMC's Official Word on User Submissions

Fans wishing to participate in *Talking Dead* must, prior to submitting their questions to AMC, agree to a set of rules and requirements. These rules and guidelines, while not as detailed as those on Reddit, outline the process for submitting questions and general conditions that must be met for a submission to be considered for inclusion on the broadcast. The legalese on AMC's *Talking Dead* website provides a basis for what AMC can do with a question as well as being aware of the waiver and release of the poster's information. Early in the document, the rigid boundaries established by AMC are detailed: "By contributing a submission to the series, you agree to be bound by these rules" (*Talking Dead Rules*, 2016). Fans who wish to submit a question, to Chris Hardwick or one of the guests, and who want to have a chance of their question being addressed on air, must abide by these rules. These rules establish a baseline of appropriateness, as defined by AMC in the following excerpt:

Fans cede control of how their questions are used at the discretion of AMC:

The decision to make use of any submission is solely at producers and AMC's discretion, and producer and AMC have no obligation to do so. By providing a submission, you

What is the most important lesson learned from this season of *The Walking Dead* so far? 1. Don't move into a prison? 2. Don't trust a guy who keeps heads in a fish tank. 3. Always use contraception during an apocalypse. 4. You can kill a person with walker bones. Go to www.talkingdead.com to vote. The typical questions often contain humorous statements in relationship to the episode or a character in that particular episode. The results, once tallied online, are read by Hardwick during the closing segment of the broadcast.

grant producer and AMC, their respective licensees, successors, and assigns a worldwide, royalty free, perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive, and fully sub-licensable and assignable license to use, reproduce, modify, adapt, edit, publish, translate, create derivative works from, distribute, perform, and display your submission (in whole or in part) in and/or in connection with the series, in any other program, or in any advertising, promotion and publicity, in any form, in any and all media now known or hereinafter devised, throughout the world, in perpetuity. Producer and/or AMC may, in their sole discretion, post or mention your first name, last name, city and/or state, in connection with use of your submission, without additional credit, compensation, notification, permission or approval (*Talking Dead* Rules, 2016).

This initial hurdle that fans must agree on does not even cover the allowable type of content of the questions. Those fans wishing to be publicly acknowledged via the *Talking Dead* broadcast must agree that while their name and location may be read aloud during the show, they forego any and all rights to future use of their comments. AMC operates under what Michel Foucault would call the *rules of right*. According to Foucault (1980), these normalized “mechanisms of power” regulate and control individuals behavior (p. 94). Communication scholars Barker and Cheney (1994) expanded on Foucault’s definition by suggesting that these “rules of right are seemingly natural rules and norms that enable the exercise of power and allow for regular governance of individuals actions... [oftentimes echoing the statement] that’s the way we do things around here” (p. 24). AMC has a liability and cannot permit any person online to post content that may contain any offensive language; otherwise, they may be subjected to fines from the FCC. AMC, as a business, will select questions and comments that will help Hardwick and his guests deliver a more entertaining show, and because of that, it is important to note that while

AMC's *Talking Dead* discusses various iterations of fan participation, the show is not a fan charity; therefore, these rules are written and enforced. Fans, then, through their adherence to these taken-for-granted rules, become increasingly disciplined in the mechanisms of power in everyday life.

Further on, the rules and guidelines document other disciplinary rhetorics that are used to frame acceptable content, and the desirable content can aid in producing engaging questions on *Talking Dead*. AMC's laundry list of items that submissions must be devoid of includes anything that "contains any obscene, offensive, libelous, defamatory, tortuous, derogatory, unlawful or otherwise inappropriate material as determined by AMC in their discretion" (*Talking Dead* Rules, 2016). Unlike online forums that may not as closely monitor the type of content generated, AMC regulates any offensive content that aims to derail the productive space rhetorically created on *Talking Dead*. What follows is a discussion of the social media website Reddit, in order to outline the various rules of conduct that users are expected to follow.

Examining the Rules on Reddit

AMC, in their initial press release for *Talking Dead*, presented a new format for fans to publicly express and display their fandom. *Talking Dead*'s host, Chris Hardwick, expressed the promise and potential for the future of fandom given this new televised broadcast in the following excerpt:

As an enormous fan of both *The Walking Dead* comic and television show, I pretty much begged for this job... Dissecting the motives of [the characters] and survivors after every episode is something I would be doing with my friends anyway, so the fact that AMC is actually paying me to do a show is a bonus. This after-show gives fans the opportunity to

nerd out about the story in a very public forum: what they like, what they don't like, or what questions they may have (Blogs AMCTV, 2011).

In order to solicit fan-input for *Talking Dead*, Hardwick, who self-identifies as a Redditor, posted his call to fellow fans via *The Walking Dead* subReddit: "Heya WD Redditors! We take questions on TD from Twitter, Facebook, email, AMC's website, THE TELEPHONE. Why not get some questions from Reddit? I says to myself, that's where's the best-est, smarty-est and nerdiest of nerd fans mingle!!!" (ChrisHardwick, N.D.). In response to Hardwick's initial appeal, over 300 Reddit users submitted questions for that night's episode of *Talking Dead*.

While most of the questions dealt with plot issues from the just-aired episode of *The Walking Dead*, there was a brief exchange between a few Redditors who questioned why Hardwick would post here (N.D.):

Warlizard: Chris Hardwick? What the hell are you doing here? Oh, and please tell me you're an actual Redditor?

Andhollysays: He mentions Reddit all the time on *Talking Dead*

Hardwick's personal connection and identification as a Reddit user is an attempt to target and channel this already opinionated community to submitting content for AMC's new show.

In general, social media websites list acceptable and unacceptable behaviors for users: most social media platforms require users to sign a user agreement when creating their profile to acknowledge their agreement with the terms and conditions of the platform/forum. Other rules are not phrased in such legalese, but are nonetheless serious. The website Reddit coined the term *reddiquette* which details the various rules and to-dos in order to navigate through their forums. Reddit makes use of a ranking system of up- and down-voting personal comments to note the importance and overall opinions of each comment. The more up-votes an individual obtains, the

more their karma points increase. The AskReddit (2016) page describes the karma process as follows:

Posts and comments accrue votes, or points, called karma. Karma is generally a measure of the perception of your contribution to Reddit. Positive karma would indicate your fellow users regarded your comments or posts as enjoyable and contributory to the subReddit. It is otherwise meaningless; you can't use it for anything, so there's no real reason to try to acquire it. Your primary focus should really be just participating in the various communities and enjoying yourself and the interaction with your fellow Redditors.

While the abovementioned quote states that karma is not quantifiable or worth seeking out, one cannot help escape the hierarchical ranking of trying to secure a top post, or at least one with ample number of up-votes.

Redditors should, according to their frequently asked question (FAQ) page, primarily concern themselves with the main rules for posting content to any subReddit. Reddit is explicit in informing and enforcing their rules to fellow Redditors: "Every subReddit has a unique set of rules regarding posting, comments and general behavior acceptable there. These are typically listed in the sidebar, often along with the FAQs and other recommended sites. Please take note of them in every subReddit you visit. Your content may be removed and/or you may be banned for violating any of the following rules and guidelines" (AskReddit, 2016). Reddit is upfront with how they want their various forums to run, and by requiring Redditors to monitor and read through the rules across the various subReddits, positions and rewards a disciplined subject.

The nine primary rules found on Reddit help remove ambiguities of what is or is not appropriate by operating in a transparent online community. There are parallels among some of

the rules and the theoretical framework of decorum. The first rule outlines the importance to clearly labeling one's post – paying particular attention to honestly representing what the post's title indicates. Rule 1 highlights the levels of appropriateness that Redditors must follow. For example, in order to combat explicit content or spam-related messages, Rule 1 stresses:

If you wish to tag your post Not Safe for Work (NSFW), either put only the letters NSFW before or after the post, or use the tagger button. Introductory statement or claims, 'baiting' devices like 'Possibly NSFW' or non-question-related information such as 'I'll start...' are a violation of this rule, and will result in the post being removed. You need to have a question mark in your question (AskReddit, 2016).

Rule 1 prefers transparency with their users in order to avoid any ambiguity regarding the content in the post. Hariman (1992) broadly characterized decorum consisting of: “the rules of conduct guiding the alignment of signs and situations, or texts and acts, or behavior and place; embodied in practices of communication and display according to a symbolic system; and providing social cohesion and distributing power” (p. 156). Rule 1 fits in with Hariman's characterization of decorum in that outlined are appropriate guidelines to perform online and, when successfully undertaken, the Reddit community functions properly.

Reddit clearly defines where individuals can and cannot post certain types of information. According to Rule 5, “posts attempting to promote a specific agenda of yours or anyone else, to gain publicity, promote a cause or charity drive, or to publicly shame a person or entity will be removed” (AskReddit, 2016). Reddit controls and threatens to ban those users who do not conform to appropriate actions. While there are exceptions to Rule 5, the responsibility is on the Redditor to read the rules on the various subReddits to see what is appropriate or inappropriate.

Reddit promotes a community that does not tolerate certain disrespectful behaviors. This is perhaps clearest in Rule 8:

All users are expected to be respectful to other users at all times. Personal attacks or comments that insult or demean a specific user or group of users will be removed and regular or egregious violations will result in bans. Please be aware that this is a site on the internet that hosts anonymous users. Thick skin is required. That said, don't be abusive or harass other users. If it is deemed that your conduct is detrimental to the experience of other users, your posting privileges will be revoked. Comments and posts mentioning subReddits and websites deemed to be harmful, because of demeaning content, spam, etc. will be filtered. Unmarked NSFW links, unmarked spoilers, misleading spam, and the likes will be removed also. Bans may be issued to users who disregard this rule (AskReddit, 2016).

Rule 8 explains that Reddit will not tolerate demeaning, insulting or harmful language. Also noted in Rule 8 are consequences for Redditors who fail to learn the language and the protocols for posting content. A large part of Reddit, especially surrounding popular media (e.g., television shows, films), makes use of various coded tags designed to hide or cloak content that may potentially spoil key information for others. These spoiler tags are enforced by subReddit moderators and policed by Redditors who flag them when spotted.¹⁰

Hardwick on Reddit and *Talking Dead*

¹⁰ In the research gathering stage of this dissertation, I saw a few posts from Redditors who failed to cloak their spoiler-centered messages and ended up revealing that a certain character died, or a plot point that had been revealed in the comic book but not yet on the television show. The Redditors seemed quick to anger and oftentimes pointed out that the user was in violation of Rule 8. After subsequent returns to those topics, most were now coded to retain the appropriate spoiler warning.

In addition to having the audience ask questions live as audience members, Hardwick at various times during the airing of *Talking Dead* has reached out to fans via Reddit to clarify how things work on *Talking Dead* by giving them his first-hand insight. For example, Apricot-jam (2015) posted on Reddit asking what happens during a live broadcast of *Talking Dead*. Hardwick responded back to Apricot-jam on Reddit with some first-hand accounts on what occurs during a taping of *Talking Dead* in the following:

The guests are marched into a studio right next to the *Price is Right* studio and they watch the episode about an hour before it actually airs. Then they're led up to our studio, which is the old Craig Ferguson stage. I tend to watch the episode at about 2 that afternoon on my laptop because when I get to work we have to do a run through of the show quickly to make sure all the clips are where they need to be. At about 20 minutes before our show airs, we come on to set and do the "Coming up on *Talking Dead*" piece with the guests and then go live at 10 EST.

Hardwick's response described the viewing process but also clarified that the audience and guests are an important part of the live taping of *Talking Dead*. The spontaneity from the live taping helped level the viewing experience so that the celebrity guests, audience members, and Reddit users can choose to share in the discussion surrounding the episode in real-time.

Hardwick, however, does not limit revealing his behind-the-scenes commentary solely to Reddit. During the live broadcast of *Talking Dead*, Hardwick has re-asserted his persona as a fan-first and the respect that he has for maintaining an untainted viewing experience. About halfway through the fourth episode of Season 3, *Talking Dead* featured a recorded interview between Hardwick and *The Walking Dead*'s main actor, Andrew Lincoln. In a surprisingly

honest move, Hardwick reasserted his fan-first persona by stressing the importance of remaining spoiler-free given his viewing experience of *The Walking Dead* in the following:

Can I just be honest about something? Can I just break the fourth wall of television? So I was nodding like a moron in that clip, but what happens is that at the beginning of the season I'll sit down and talk to Andy about everything we've seen up till now, then I leave the room because I don't want anything spoiled. So he's essentially talking to a producer and they just get shots of me nodding and smirking. So, that's why I don't even need to be in that clip, it's all Andy, but that was great information that he provided.

Hardwick's decision to reveal this behind-the-scenes camera trick to his audience helps balance the power he has as the show's host while not compromising his ethos as a fan. By asserting himself as fan-first, Hardwick is able to rhetorically situate himself within the fan-narratives that are discussed on the show without the fear of accidentally ruining some key detail/scene by spoiling the future plot points or character deaths, and allow for the series fans and guests to comment on and dissect the series on *Talking Dead*. Granted, while Hardwick is a unique fan who has access to guests and other confidential information, his televised performance as a facilitator for on-air discussion trumps his personal knowledge and potential spoilers he may know. Fans may be able to then place a greater sense of trust in him given his track record across the series of not ruining the audience's viewing experience by giving away key information.

What we have seen thus far is that both Reddit and AMC have clear rules that highlight the level of appropriate behaviors that fans are expected to subscribe to when posting content and commenting about the television show. What follows is a discussion of three separate narratives that Reddit users have identified as those ideal and engaged characteristics of *Talking Dead* fans.

Who Are the Ideal *Talking Dead* Fans?

Drawing upon the Reddit discussion forums, pro-*Talking Dead* fans were vocal in describing their enjoyment, support, and overall need for such a show. As I read through the various fan discourse, I identified three overarching patterns within the narratives of fan submissions via the subReddit that help characterize the engaged *Talking Dead* fan. These narratives include: 1) the additional content on *Talking Dead* is important for fans to complete their viewing experience; 2) that the fans identify and support the celebrity guests and their insights; and, 3) these fans receive a sense of self-validation and satisfaction in being included, and particularly for being acknowledged on-air, during the episode. These narratives help flesh out those characteristics that embody the targeted ideal fan watching *Talking Dead* and *The Walking Dead*.

Narrative 1: More Content, Access, and Complete Viewing Experience

What is the appeal for fans to watch a discussion-based show about zombies? The first narrative identified within the Reddit forums centers on viewing *Talking Dead* as an essential viewing component for fans of *The Walking Dead*. AMC's decision to broadcast *Talking Dead* created opportunities for fans on Reddit to praise this unique moment in television history as illustrated in the following: "Dude, what other show even has an after show? I think we're incredibly lucky to have a show follow it and it is amazing if you're a fan of the show and comics because you know Chris Hardwick is just as big of a fan because it shows" (ValleyChip, 2012).

The rhetoric produced from *Talking Dead*, via AMC's website, already positions the over-arching *Walking Dead* fan community within the narrative of The *Talking Dead* experience. Consider their call to fans on the AMC sponsored *Talking Dead* blog:

Have a question for Chris Hardwick or one of his guests? Want to show off your fan art and have it featured live on an episode of *Talking Dead*? Interacting with the show is easy. Just make a submission using one of the methods below and you could end up on a live episode this season (Talking Dead Blog, 2015).

The blog then lists ahead of time various communication channels for fans to reach out and connect/interact with the show and the guests: from phone, e-mail, and social media websites like Facebook and Twitter to their “Play Along Live” feature where fans can visit a website while the show airs to participate in a variety of live polls and quizzes that are streamed live to their smart phone, computer, or tablet. In addition, *Talking Dead* also attempts to target those fans during the broadcast through numerous TV advertisements that provide a snapshot preview for the upcoming episode, and by highlighting various ways they can publicly display their fandom in addition to submitting their questions¹¹. AMC’s rhetoric reframes any discussion about fandom away from the questions like “Why does someone like *Talking Dead*?” to more declarative statements like “Here’s how you can publicly display your *Walking Dead* fandom”. The rhetoric produced by AMC, and echoed by the fans, in the above-mentioned quotes, suggests that the ideal *Talking Dead* fan should embrace using these technological features in order to more fully gain an immersive experience in publicly displaying their fandom.

Some Redditors enjoy watching *Talking Dead* because of the additional knowledge and insight described by the guests. “I love *Talking Dead* and never miss an episode, and always

¹¹ Each week on *Talking Dead*, AMC offers fans the opportunity to envision themselves as zombies through their contest called the Dead Yourself Fan of the Week. Fans wishing to participate had to download the mobile Dead Yourself app and the templates and filters of the app then project their picture as a zombie in *The Walking Dead*. Hardwick, prior to a commercial, would display the Fan of the Week for a few seconds during the broadcast of the episode. More recently, AMC launched the official mobile game entitled No Man’s Land in 2015 featuring the fan-favorite character Daryl Dixon. Media studies scholars like Jonathan Gray (2010) discuss these supplementary media content, or paratexts, that help support or advertise for a larger franchise (e.g., behind-the-scenes featurettes or video games). However, even though these paratexts do not specifically contribute to the discussion element of fan engagement, they do show the extent of the various arenas where AMC markets *The Walking Dead* to their fans.

watch the extra footage on the website; sure, some guests are better than others, but I always find that discussion interesting and always learn something new” (ItsNotFunny, 2012). Other fans on Reddit commented on the importance of socially dissecting the just-viewed episode of *The Walking Dead* for enhancing their viewing experience. For example, one Redditor viewed the show as a substitute for face-to-face conversations: “I watch *Talking Dead* because I enjoy the banter and guests. It’s like a book club for television. Shows like *Talking Dead* give you an instantly available stand-in for that in-person group discussion. Moreover, it provides a kind of post-episode cool down during which you think about what happened and how it fits into the bigger picture of the series” (Youre_real_uriel, 2016). Another fan explained that they watch the broadcast because they are able to share in the guest’s reactions to episode-specific scenes as part of their viewing experience: “Personally, I enjoy *Talking Dead* and routinely watch after each episode. Mostly because I watch the show by myself and sometimes after an intense episode you just want to share an OMFG moment. Watching *Talking Dead* makes you feel like you are sharing that or it gives me that feeling anyway” (SLM1968, 2015).

Fans, like those in the abovementioned quotes, agree that their enjoyment increases when discussion flows, therefore, *Talking Dead* subscribes to an initiative-based model of fandom. Under this type of model, both the fans and the network benefit: the fans are entertained listening to other fans theorize about the episode and in turn, AMC receives a boost in ratings. Even the Redditors point out how profitable *Talking Dead* is for AMC: “For me, *Talking Dead* is like jumping onto Reddit to comment after you watch an episode, except, it is on TV and there are celebrities gushing and theorizing and making jokes and whatnot. AMC makes the show because it is incredibly cheap to produce and it holds onto *The Walking Dead* viewers better than other shows they’ve tried in that time slot. That is easy money for AMC” (Polarbit, 2016). Financially,

it makes sense that *Talking Dead* fans are already *The Walking Dead* fans so there is an existing, sizable fan base and potential audience for the live after show.

It may sound cliché, but for some fans, knowledge is power, and gaining that knowledge, or getting another perspective, matters to them. *Talking Dead* closes each episode with a preview for the upcoming episode of *The Walking Dead*. Usually this is something that has been built up throughout the episode, and the camera plays it up to the audience. The rhetoric produced on *Talking Dead* entices fans to keep watching and provides their audience with supplemental material to give them an immersive viewing experience. Charland (1987) reasserts the very realness of the constituted identity: Constitutive rhetoric “articulates [that] the meaning...is not a mere fiction. It inscribes real social actors within its textualized structure of motives, and then inserts them into the world of practice” (p. 142). As one of the Redditors noted, watching *Talking Dead* serves a very practical purpose for their fandom: “Sometimes you find out things about the show that you won’t see anywhere else, even here on Reddit. Overall, it’s worth staying up for” (BlueOak777, 2012). Shows like *Talking Dead* have found their niche with audiences, and even though showing a preview is not exclusive to this program, the immersive potential is there for the taking.

Some online fans however are renegotiating their own preference for fan participation on *Talking Dead*. Consider the following response:

I do enjoy *Talking Dead* because it extends my *Walking Dead* experience if just a tiny bit...I understand that really cool, knowledgeable and interesting people don’t always have time to do silly talk shows like *Talking Dead*, but I would so much rather have an unknown fan on the show discussing things than some semi-celebrity who has only seen

one episode and didn't quite get it. Fans would totally make time to be on the show every week and they would have way more intelligent things to say (DLissis, 2012).

DLissis's comment suggests that while fans have a voice and would be more than willing to partake in this type of forum, to do so, they must negotiate the space already reserved for the celebrities and producers who were selected to appear on the show. This is a prime example of the exclusionary power that Charland's theory offers, in defining what the celebrity fan guests can contribute compared to the opportunity for the everyday fan to critically engage and participate in their fandom. AMC and *Talking Dead* frame their narrative towards an engaged fan base, but as DLissis notes, even though unknown fans may have more intelligent things to say, *Talking Dead* fans are operating under the rules and restrictions set forth by the network, as established earlier in this chapter. According to the theory of constitutive rhetoric, "the narrative is a structure of understanding that produces totalizing interpretations [that] the subject is constrained to follow through... [in order] to maintain the narrative's consistency" (Charland, 1987, p.141). Fans on social media may have the overall competence and knowledge of the show to converse and offer their insights, yet the barriers of entrance are high, and the acceptance rate is quite low, meaning that the insights offered by the celebrity guests are weighed differently. The celebrity guests on *Talking Dead* are prominently given space onscreen to analyze the episode whereas the questions from fans on social media are seemingly selected at random to help facilitate the broadcasted discussion. The narrative framework of *Talking Dead* reinforces the abovementioned differences, so even though users like DLissis may want to see something more from the everyday fan and their critical perspective, the show's format limits the amount of onscreen time that fans are given to voice their questions. In essence, the fan selected to read

their question, or have their question read by Chris Hardwick supports and is in service to the larger questions and discussions already enacted by AMC and their celebrity guests that week. This brings me to the second narrative of engaged fandom that Redditors communicate: expressing their support for *Talking Dead* by identifying with the guests and their content that they contribute via the program's broadcast. This type of fan support manifests in productive ways that retain the narrative consistency established by *Talking Dead* – or more specifically, supporting those pre-selected, network-approved fans.

Narrative 2: Fan Identification on *Talking Dead*

One reason why *Talking Dead* has been successful for the Redditors lies in its applicability to having similar conversations with one's friends. What *Talking Dead* attempts to recognize and promote, at the base level, is that the guests appearing on the show are first “fans” of *The Walking Dead*. Celebrity fan and repeat guest on *Talking Dead*, Yvette Nicole Brown, recently explained to the website *TV Insider* just how much her *Walking Dead* fandom has shaped her life and her experiences with fans both onscreen and off in the following:

I have a conversation about *The Walking Dead* every single day I leave my house. I will run into someone who's a fan of the show and they'll have a question or want to discuss the finer points of Richonne. Which is a ship that became canon and well...I digress. Simply put, this show about zombies has opened up my world in a beautiful way because I get to have conversations with strangers who aren't strangers because we have this mutual love for this wonderful creation. I can find a friend in any city I visit. I can find a friend in any grocery store that I enter. They're every race, every age, men and women.

Some of them are children; some of them are 80 years old. And we can all just come together and have a wonderful conversation about a zombie show (TV Insider, 2017).

For celebrity guests like Brown, their fandom is a prominent part of their identity. Being able to discuss the minutia of the episode, or to think through their favorite onscreen character relationship are common fan activities that are not simply relegated to their celebrity status. Brown's ability to critically analyze the series during multiple episodes of *Talking Dead* as well as in the abovementioned situation highlights her as an exemplary *Talking Dead* guest who exhibits this fan-first persona.

Redditors, via their online narratives, are drawn to this fan-first persona and accept and openly praise the celebrities-as-fans if they meet two criteria: 1) If the celebrity was familiar with the source material and 2) if the celebrity could productively contribute to the discussion. The Reddit fans, though, are highly critical and quick to judge those so-called pseudo-fans who they perceive use *Talking Dead* solely as a vehicle for self-promotion. For example, when the guest seems to lack the knowledge or ability to contribute productively to analyzing the episode (Chapter 4 will highlight these specific types of interactions), the subReddit fans question their reasoning behind the appearance as simply a PR stop promoting their creative endeavors. Consider the following quote about those guests who fail to meet the subRedditors' expectations of fan engagement: "Don't put idiot guests on just to promote their BS. We want to see people somehow related to the show or those that can hold a real conversation about *The Walking Dead*" (BlueOak777, 2012).

Redditors, in their posts, attempt to identify with celebrity fans as genuine super-fans of *The Walking Dead*, and attempt to offer praise for acknowledging similarities to their own enactment of fan behavior. Consider the following quote from The_Bravinator (2013): "It's

pretty good when they are genuinely super-fans and can sort of participate as stand-ins for us as the audience”. The rhetoric of this message establishes a baseline of dedication and engagement by identifying fellow Reddit users as “super-fans”. Other posts in the same forum took up The_Bravinator’s statement by offering their own observations on what makes up a super-fan identity. For example, Murmur322 (2013) explained a recent appearance by Yvette Nicole Brown as fitting the super-fan identity. Murmur322 expands upon this conceptualization of the super-fan as something that goes beyond one’s celebrity status into something more inscribed within the person in the following excerpt.

I miss that comedian lady who was on last season of *Talking Dead*. Now she may not have had anything to do with the show, but she cared about it. She always made really good points; she knew the comics and the series as a fan. And not just as a super-fan because she’s famous. She’s a super-fan because she cares about the source material as much as anyone on this subReddit, and that’s what I want to see on *Talking Dead*: people who care about the show discussing it.

These quotes from the Redditors function rhetorically by seeking identification centering on their fan status rather than their celebrity status. What the Reddit posts attempt to accomplish is to provide a justification for leveling fandom across the Redditors and the celebrity super-fans who appear on *Talking Dead*. While the format of *Talking Dead* dictates that only celebrities appear as guests, the acknowledgement and praise from some social media fans on Reddit for these celebrity super-fans solidifies what they deem as appropriate fan behavior. For these Redditors, *Talking Dead* continues to keep their interest when the celebrities-as-fans subscribe to this fan-forward persona. The hodge-podge of celebrity guests who have appeared on *Talking Dead* helps maintain the ubiquitous presence of *The Walking Dead* fans at large. As Geekchicgrrl (2013)

reaffirmed, “I love that they have random celebrity fans come on. More often than not, they’re genuine fans of the show and lend a lot to the conversation, and when Joe Manganiello was on, almost every comment out of his mouth was something I would have said”. The pro-*Talking Dead* Redditors impose a high degree of authenticity upon celebrities and their honest representation of their fandom, yet as we have seen in the preceding excerpts, details are scarce which leave it open for mostly personal identification (e.g., ‘hey that’s something I would say’) rather than embodying a shared rhetoric among the Redditors.

Comments and conversations on Reddit highlight this personal identification by seeing something like a shared perspective or similar viewpoint. Consider the interaction between the users FangedParakeet and Joeydyee (2013) and their discussion about online versus face-to-face fan behaviors in the following interaction.

Joeydyee: While I think an hour may be a bit excessive for *Talking Dead*, it makes total sense to me that it exists and I enjoy it. There are tons of people all over the internet on blogs and communities like /r/thewalkingdead who talk about this stuff right after the show anyway, why not put it on camera for people to watch?

FangedParakeet: It’s nice discussing episodes with other people on forums where sometimes someone will notice some miniature detail or reveal a new perspective, but what insight does anyone really expect to come from a celebrity and why would anyone care to stick around for 40 minutes to find out?

Joeydyee: I think it’s an interesting idea to gather celebrities from various walks of life together on the show. I’m always interested to find out that I share a common specific interest with an actor or musician, so I think it’s cool that on *Talking Dead* I can hear them explain why they like it.

The entire exchange is included between the two Redditors in order to trace some of the specific motives that Joeydyee mentions in her shared, albeit personal, connection with the celebrities. Both users acknowledge the online community of *The Walking Dead* subReddit as a place where they can gain new insights about the series. The user Joeydyee emphasizes affirmation and personal validation felt from these seemingly small shared experiences with celebrities.

Redditors explain that another reason why they enjoy seeing a variety of celebrities on *Talking Dead* is because they are not limited, like those officially connected to *The Walking Dead*, on what they can or cannot reveal. “The actors [on *The Walking Dead*] can’t speculate, which is what the show is about” (JustinFromMontebello, 2013). *Talking Dead* is a show that is built around interpretation, speculation, and prediction, and JustinFromMontebello describes the possible limitation of severely restricting speculation. Actors, directors, and producers who work on *The Walking Dead* are constrained by the network to avoid spoilers, so while they may offer a first-hand perspective or behind-the-scenes insight, they are unable to speculate or theorize as openly as those celebrity guests not officially affiliated with the series.

Television shows like *Talking Dead* highlight and reward discussion and deliberation by transforming what talk shows can do for popular culture. Betafish27 (2012) praises *Talking Dead* for being relatable because “the show is like talking about my favorite TV show with my geeky friends”. *Talking Dead* fans are becoming a piece of the narrative that AMC has created, and they embody their role as an engaged fan by consuming the additional content and seeking personal common ground with the celebrity fans that appear on the show. What follows is the third narrative that was uncovered from the subReddit forums centering on fans’ satisfaction and validation after their comments were acknowledged by those closely connected with *Talking Dead* (e.g., AMC, Chris Hardwick, and fans).

Narrative 3: Self-Validation and Satisfaction

Initially I expected to find fans commenting and discussing with others on the forums that their question was read on-air, yet this was not the case. Most of the online fan support and discussion came from the content and talking points that were generated during that particular broadcast. One exception to this rule that I observed from the discussion forums came when Chris Hardwick specifically acknowledged the Reddit community. These shout-outs, while general and brief, served to both validate the community of Redditors and helped situate them into the fan narratives constructed around *Talking Dead*. The most blatant example of these shout-outs appeared during the *Talking Dead* Season 3 preview episode, when *The Walking Dead* subReddit hosted a live forum for Redditors to comment on the episode. The official moderator for *The Walking Dead* subReddit posted the following initial call:

I figure enough people have been re-watching the show the last few days on AMC that we might be able to discuss tonight's episode of *The Talking Dead* that includes a sneak peek for season 3. It airs in about 5 minutes. You guys should tweet @AMCTalkingDead and ask Chris Hardwick to give another Reddit shout-out (Edify, 2012).

By the time the episode finished airing, over 300 comments were posted to the forum. In reading through these discussions I observed that even a brief acknowledgement of the Reddit community became imbued with meaning and gave the Redditors a sense of legitimacy by reaffirming their place, and space, within *The Walking Dead* fandom.

The first shout-out to the Reddit fans came within the first minute of *Talking Dead*. After introducing the special guests, including *The Price is Right* host Drew Carey, Chris Hardwick stated: "I was combing Reddit before and they were like, wow, Drew Carey is a zombie fan". In the larger scope of things, the comment only pointed out that people on that particular social

media platform were surprised to find out that an actor was a fan of the series, but the mere mention of their community produced some discussion in the forum. First, Chris Hardwick's shout-out is important to these Redditors because they identify him as one of their own. As mentioned previously, Hardwick is no stranger to posting comments and interacting with his fans on Reddit. While the shout-out does not specifically highlight a particular screen name that submitted a question, the acknowledgement about their discussions online lends a sense of validation to the larger *Talking Dead* fan base on the subReddit. It is the community-at-large and their general acknowledgement that may speak to a shared rhetorical identity as "fans". Granted, the shout-out is not attempting to generalize to all social media fans, but rather link those members who already accept and acknowledge themselves as Redditors.

The forum quickly was flooded with the initial comments: "Chris Hardwick is giving Reddit a shout-out, ha!" (Zex-258, 2012). It should be noted that none of the guests, including *The Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman, acknowledged Reddit during the episode. However, this did not seem to bother the Redditors because their community in its entirety is included from the rhetoric produced by AMC. Zex-258 and the subsequent discussion seem to highlight an important element of ideological criticism, namely that the "subjects owe their existence to the discourse that articulates them" (Charland, p.143). The entire text of *Talking Dead* helps position the fan across various dimensions: audience member, online contributor/poster, and the celebrity-as-fan. The shout-out to the Reddit community helps to recognize and articulate a community of fans. Consider the following exchange right after Hardwick's shout-out (2012):

Midnightwalrus: Reddit shout-out right off the bat. Not bad, not bad.

Jeller90: I immediately came here when I heard him say it. Word travels fast

Midnightwalrus: Makes your ears perk up, doesn't it? Haha

Ricktron3030: I felt like he was talking to me!

GravyDavy78: Another shout-out to Reddit!

Drk_etta: Yeah! I wasn't really paying attention but I thought I heard him say Reddit. I had to rewind to make sure.

SilentChimp: Indeed. I wasn't expecting it.

Drakefyre: My goodness. We're all sheep! We hear Reddit and immediately find out why

TechNizzle969: Haha yep. As soon as I heard him say Reddit I came to
r/thewalkingdead!

In this extended exchange, the *Talking Dead* fans on Reddit express their appreciation of the acknowledgement. This particular example ties back to Charland's interpretation of the ideological effect of the narrative. In drawing upon both Michael McGee and Roland Barthes, Charland argued that narratives "constitute subjects as they present a particular textual position...as the locus for action and experience [and that] the distinct acts and events in a narrative become linked through identification arising from the narrative form" (pp. 138-139). The Reddit shout-out is representational because their identity exists within the narrative provided by *Talking Dead*. Whether one was or was not talking about Drew Carey's status as a *Walking Dead* fan is not the concern. Their fan identity exists materially to help further establish the narrative's consistency of engaged fandom based on their quick reactions to Chris Hardwick's shout-out(s).

The final example from this narrative of self-validation and satisfaction featured a fan that had her question answered on *Talking Dead*. While the lack of interactions among Redditors to seek approval was rarely discussed publicly on Reddit, a majority of the validating comments came from the fans' identification with the guests and the content they discussed. During the

Season 3 finale, Chris Hardwick had Andrew Lincoln, *The Walking Dead's* main protagonist, on for the first time since *Talking Dead* began airing. Redditors were very excited that the lead actor would be sitting down to talk with Hardwick about the series. What was notable about this particular episode was that they used Skype for fans to submit their questions via video chat rather than being limited to text or in-person as an audience member. About thirty minutes into the broadcast, and after two Skype questions, Hardwick mentioned that there was one final question via Skype for Andrew to answer.

While the guests looked at the television screen, they noticed a woman holding up a large white cardboard sign with words on it. Heather, from Baltimore Maryland, asked Andrew: “What do you think is more challenging for Rick.../ Being a good father? / Or being a good leader? / PS. It’s not Christmas but.../ To me you are (the) perfect Rick Grimes”. On the surface, this might seem random, but fans of Andrew Lincoln may remember the 2003 romantic comedy *Love Actually* where Andrew’s character, Mark, professed his love for his best friend’s wife, Juliet, by writing out his heartfelt message on large white cardboard signs. One can notice the similarities of phrasing comparing Heather’s *Talking Dead* question to Lincoln’s script in *Love Actually*: “With any luck by next year/ I’ll be going out with one of these girls/ But for now, let me say/ Without hope or agenda/ Just because it’s Christmas/ (And at Christmas you tell the truth)/ To me, you are perfect/ And my wasted heart will love you/ Until you look like this/ Merry Christmas”.

About half way through reading the question, Hardwick and the audience began to laugh and applaud. As the camera panned back to Andrew, the audience could see him smiling and blushing while Hardwick commented “She was giving us a little nod to your role in *Love Actually*”. Andrew replied saying that he got the reference and Hardwick thanked Heather and

the others who submitted questions via Skype and the conversation shifted to other topics from that evening's episode.

On Reddit the following day MsOrange1, aka Heather from Baltimore, created a forum called "I made Andrew Lincoln blush on *The Talking Dead* last night". Heather commented that "I was already worried that people might not get the *Love Actually* reference, so I figured that would make people really go, "huh?" Clearly I underestimated fans haha" (MsOrange1, 2014). Throughout the conversation, a majority of the 64 Reddit responses helped validate Heather's fan identity (2014):

Total_extreme_panda: I knew that was a redditor!

Nimassane: I like your originality, using those poster cards was a brilliant idea!

Nicol3xc: I enjoyed that so much last night. You rock.

Admdelta: That was awesome. *Love Actually* is one of my favorite movies, so I caught on as soon as the third card mentioned "Christmas" and immediately got mega excited.

Thanks for making me smile!

Gurunexx: That was great. I loved his reaction; you can tell he really felt embarrassed.

Clearly, this forum featured the Reddit community praising one of their own. This example helps illustrate how official recognition and validation from *Talking Dead*, along with those comments from her peers on Reddit, can provide meaning and reaffirm one's status as an engaged fan. Heather's responses to the Redditors were very gracious. As a *Talking Dead* fan, she found her "in" and it worked.

Near the end of the conversation, Heather posted a call for her fellow Redditors to check out her writings about *The Walking Dead* in the following:

I really appreciate all of you checking out my *Talking Dead* story. I also hope you will check out my *Walking Dead* writing! I've been writing reviews weekly for a while. It's a lot of fun and I love to share it with fellow fans. I'm sorry if this is over-stepping some reddiquette, but I don't get paid for this site or anything, I founded it myself three years ago and run it entirely alone for the love of the genre, and I just want to share it with fellow fans. So, if you dig my sense of humor in that *Talking Dead* bit, please check it out, thanks.

None of the remaining comments on Reddit acknowledge this plug to view her writings about *The Walking Dead*. While this might seem odd, it does uphold in the rhetoric what the pro-*Talking Dead* fans uphold on Reddit – that of discussing the show and theorizing about specific scenes and motives of their favorite characters rather than engaging in the self-promotion of extraneous fan labor. Also, there were no other comments in these Reddit forums dealing specifically with *Talking Dead* that described fan activities like fan-fiction, fan art, or plugging their own websites. This is not to say that no one visited Heather's website, or found her writing humorous as additional text in their enjoyment of *The Walking Dead*. Simply put, these types of comments were inappropriate given this particular outlet for these specific types of fans.

What we've seen so far from the various narratives about *Talking Dead* fans helps describe their constituted identity. The rhetorical narratives of the *Talking Dead* fans on Reddit highlight that they enjoy the broadcast for three main reasons: 1) the show is an essential part of their viewing experience; 2) they are able to identify with guests and support publicizing the fan-first identity of the celebrities; and, 3) they equate acknowledgement with praise when called out by Chris Hardwick.

In the following section, I turn my attention to discussing two exemplar episodes of *Talking Dead*, as vetted by the Reddit community, in order to further discuss and describe the rhetoric of the engaged celebrity *Talking Dead* fan. These episodes and celebrity-guests were discussed by users, at a greater frequency, across multiple subReddit forums, than other guests who have appeared on *Talking Dead* at the time of this writing. As one Redditor commented: “I thought it was a good episode of *Talking Dead*. Much like last year with CM Punk (another wrestler and avid comic book fan) and Yvette Nicole Brown (Shirley from *Community*) who has done her research on the show. Apparently that’s just a good combination...pro wrestler + cast member of *Community*...it hasn’t failed yet” (CobraTI, 2013).

Exemplar #1 - CM Punk and Yvette Nicole Brown – S02E07

On this episode of *Talking Dead*, Chris Hardwick welcomed WWE Superstar CM Punk along with *Community* actress Yvette Nicole Brown to the couch to discuss all things related to *The Walking Dead*. During this time, *Talking Dead* was still only 30 minutes long, yet despite the episode’s length Redditors praised both Punk’s and Brown’s performance as some of the best guests appearing on the show thus far. Fan comments on the Reddit forums highlighted the perceived thoughtfulness and in-depth analysis that both guests provided during the broadcast. One such Redditor had this to say about Yvette Nicole Brown:

I love that she dissects [*The Walking Dead*] like a huge fan; she said that when she was on *Talking Dead* that she watches it once to watch it, then a couple more times to get the nuance and foreshadowing and to analyze things. Sometimes the celebrity guests just don’t bring much to the table, but she is great (Ihearthing, 2016).

This quotation emphasizes the level of commitment and dedication that Brown has towards the source material that separates her behavior and performance apart from other celebrity guests

who have appeared on the show. Brown, for Ihearthiking, becomes symbolic of the engaged fan: displaying a dedicated fan-forward persona that is eager to discuss, debate, and deliberate with the other guests on *Talking Dead*. This quote also maintains narrative consistency by identifying with the celebrity-fans appearing on the broadcast.

The subReddit fans' rhetoric frames Punk and Brown as genuine fans of the series.

I LOVE when she is on *Talking Dead* – she is so insightful and sees all the symbolism they work so hard to put into the show. She brings for really great discussions.

Sometimes the guests on there are SO DULL. (Roowrangler, 2016)

These perceived notions of authenticity stand in stark contrast to the contributions of *Talking Dead* guests Sarah Silverman¹², who was universally panned on Reddit for her incoherent analyses and overall unfamiliarity with general plot points from past seasons of *The Walking Dead*. Commenting on Silverman's performance, one Redditor stated: "Usually I enjoy the *Talking Dead's* guest stars because at least one of them had a hand in the production of the show and you get to gain insight into what kind of work they did in the series; tonight however, I felt that neither guest added any interesting commentary and in fact degraded the quality of the show due to their inept dialogue" (Pharoon, 2012).

Fans have shown support for Yvette Nicole Brown, noting her passionate performances on *Talking Dead*: she oftentimes wears her emotions on her sleeve and is unapologetic for expressing them. During the sixth season of *The Walking Dead*, two of the main characters, Rick and Michonne, entered into a relationship which resulted in a lot of fan discussion on social media. Brown, a self-identified fan-shipper¹³ for Rick and Michonne, could not contain her

¹² Sarah Silverman and Marilyn Manson will serve as case studies in the next chapter detailing the disciplinary rhetorical strategies enacted by fans and AMC on *Talking Dead*.

¹³ Shipping is a common fan practice where people cheer for a relationship among characters usually in television shows. For example, if a fan really wanted to see Rick and Michonne be together romantically, fans would be shipping

excitement in seeing this pairing actually happen on *The Walking Dead*. Brown's enthusiasm for Rick and Michonne's newfound relationship became a topic of discussion on Reddit: "I was all watery eyed and couldn't stop smiling when they showed her [Yvette's] reaction. Such a great moment of joy, you know she'd been dying for this for literal years" (MaestroLogical, 2016).

Brown's emotional attachment towards *The Walking Dead's* characters helps link her performance on *Talking Dead* to the Redditors who display and posted similar statements. Brown performs her fandom in a manner that is not entirely unfamiliar to what the Redditors post online. An example from the second season of *Talking Dead* highlights Brown's pathos appeals to not only the fictional characters in the series but to those Redditors who identify with her as a fan. The episode featured an emotional scene involving Maggie, who is sexually violated by the season's main villain, The Governor. In the following, Brown's response to Hardwick's question uses sympathy to appeal to her audience in analyzing the difficult scene:

I've never been beaten or violated, thank the Lord, but I think I would rather be beaten and let the wounds heal rather than being bent over a table half naked with the Governor.

I felt that that was a way to really bring her character low.

Brown and Hardwick express their vulnerability as fans that are unable to change the filmed scene. Hardwick interjected that during this scene he began to plead with the TV saying "Please don't do that, I really want to be like, I do not want to be this mad at the show!" Brown agreed with Hardwick's statement and continued to express how the show personally affected her in the following:

them. Oftentimes fans combine parts of their names to create their combined relationship persona. In the case of supporting Rick and Michonne, you would refer to their relationship status by calling them their shipper name: Richonne.

That says a lot. We've seen some things, we've seen viscera and other things happening, and the fact that this was the thing we both were like, oh no, please not this. And I think that it says more about who the Governor is than even Maggie's resilience. It was a total power play, so when it's that, then you know that this is a deranged man who will do anything to get what he wants, and that, to me, is very scary.

Brown's reaction is very real and akin to how someone would normally react to a rape scene, but it is her commitment and passion which she communicates while on *Talking Dead* that resonate acceptance with the Redditors. Brown's commentary on the scene goes beyond a summary of events that occurred on screen and delves deeper, becoming more critical and interpretive in looking at the character's motivations in the scripted show.

Much of the discussion between Brown and Punk draws upon specific instances from previous episodes and past seasons of the show, and how these tensions build and have lingering implications for the future of these characters. It is the guests' analysis of the scenes and specific references back to quotes from the episodes that point out this greater involvement and immersion that audience members can choose to engage with via *The Walking Dead* fandom. What follows is a second exemplar that points to celebrity insights and commentary so valued by fans via *The Walking Dead* subReddit.

Exemplar #2 - Chris Jericho and Gillian Jacobs – S03E04

Chris Hardwick: You know what I think, I think you should sit here (motioning towards the host's chair) and I'll go over there (motioning towards the couch where Jericho was sitting). That's a really good point. Those are really good points Chris Jericho!

Chris Jericho: I wanted to come up strong for you guys during this episode. We needed a good show!

Hardwick: You've done an amazing job, thank you very much.

The Reddit forums stated that this episode was a return to form for *Talking Dead* and that "Chris Jericho just about made up for Manson's performance last week" (Karo2theG, 2013). Alluding to Manson's performance the previous week, Talis26 (2013) stated that "I'm shocked at how good he was considering how awful the guests can sometimes be on *Talking Dead*". The second exemplar episode of *Talking Dead* that the Redditors identified as noteworthy came from the third season and featured professional wrestling superstar Chris Jericho and *Community* actress Gillian Jacobs as that evening's guests. Along with Yvette Nicole Brown's appearance the previous season, Redditors praised Chris Jericho's analysis and observations he made about the episode. The Reddit community took an immediate liking to how quickly Jericho began discussing that evening's episode: "Instead of making jokes, he was talking about the show. Too many guests talk about other things, and Jericho just jumped into talking about the episode. I loved it!" (Empireandall, 2013).

Some fans however, displayed an initial hesitation about Jericho's ability to carry out a conversation given his status as a professional wrestling entertainer. One particular fan's interchange on Reddit illustrated how Jericho's sense of identification with his analysis helped change her initial preconceptions: "I kind of rolled my eyes when he was introduced. I was expecting him to be dumb because he's a wrestler. I totally prejudiced him. He was awesome, enthusiastic, engaging and intelligent. Shame on me" (Ladyfriday, 2013). The quote indicates that Ladyfriday is not a fan of professional wrestling but because Jericho created identification with a show that she loves, she was able to not only overcome her own prejudices, but publicly admit to them online in the Reddit forums. Jericho's ability to persuade Ladyfriday that he was a fan based on her own criteria convinced her to change her mind about him. For fans like

Ladyfriday, we can see just how high on their value list a show like *Talking Dead* is – enough to admit a previous bias. After other Redditors offered their support for Jericho, Ladyfriday addressed the criticism for her initial prejudices against professional wrestling in the following:

[Professional] wrestling to me has white trash connotations. It was close-minded of me to think that. I never said it was a good thing to think, and I was pleasantly surprised that he was so awesome. He was WAY more articulate and intelligent than I expected. I enjoyed him as a guest. He was engaged in the material, stayed on topic, and was very interesting. I feel bad for assuming he'd be dumb because he's a wrestler (Ladyfriday, 2013).

This excerpt is both powerful and fascinating to read because Ladyfriday completely shifted her viewpoint and identified with Jericho's observations, and in doing so, put aside her own preconceptions and focused on their shared fandom.

Other fans supported Jericho's commentary and wished that AMC would bring him back on as a regular guest, or at least take notes as an ideal *Talking Dead* guest in the following:

I wasn't surprised at all. I knew Jericho's been a big ol' nerd for a long time. He loves *The Walking Dead* comics and I'd expect him to really pay attention to the show. But the people behind this should take notes from this episode about how well things go when you invite people on that can hold up an intellectual discussion. I was seriously considering dropping [*The Walking Dead*] this season...and seeing Jericho's discussion on *Talking Dead* really reignited a spark that makes me keep going on with the show (Jmaisonet, 2013).

These Reddit fans commented on Jericho's eloquence and thoroughness, as well as how he consistently made coherent arguments that he deliberated on the show. Nickhenne (2013) spoke towards Jericho's authenticity as a fan: "I think he talked a lot out of enthusiasm, rather than

trying to make an image for himself. I thought he seemed more like a genuine fan rather than a star they brought onto the show for viewership”. These comments reinforce the qualities that Redditors look for in an engaged fan – and both Nickhenne and Jmaisonet identify with Jericho’s contributions as a fan first, rather than Jericho’s celebrity status.

These fans view *Talking Dead* as an essential component of their viewing experience and identify with the on-air guests’ analyses and observations. The *Talking Dead* fans embrace and recognize the celebrity guests as fans first, and celebrate their own fandom by continuing on with these discussions via social media. While public praise may not be as pronounced on the Reddit forums, the *Talking Dead* fans celebrate Chris Hardwick’s acknowledgement of their community as validation that has been granted upon them by one of their own. Many of the Redditors rightly place their trust in him to make *Talking Dead* a rewarding viewing ritual. While Hardwick embraces his own fan first persona on *Talking Dead*, there is, on Reddit, a growing body of fans publicly expressing their hatred towards all things related to *Talking Dead*, including the necessity of the show, AMC’s selection of guests, and to finally Chris Hardwick himself. The following section presents the opposing view and construction of the anti-*Talking Dead* fan, and those fan narratives characterizing this particular identity.

Constituting the Anti-*Talking Dead* Fan

One does not have to scroll very far down in the comments section on many YouTube videos or venture too far onto the Reddit forums before the conversation turns into pointed and particularly vicious attacks based on the content of the video or clip up for discussion. So, too, are the conversations that are critical about *Talking Dead*, as illustrated in the following excerpts: “To me, it seems like they make way too big of a deal over a mediocre show” (Mastershake04, 2012). More recently one Redditor commented: “I don’t enjoy Talking Dead very much. Mainly

because of the way it is edited and put together. To me, it kind of looks and sounds like zombie Sports Center...I don't know, I just don't enjoy it" (OneEyedCoral, 2017). The preceding quotes, tame in comparisons to others on social media, highlight a concern for some: namely, the rationale for why there is an after-show about a scripted show, and who cares what celebrities and other fans on social media have to say about it? Other more vociferous comments were directed as personal attacks against Chris Hardwick for ruining the fan's immersive viewing experience while watching *The Walking Dead* by interrupting intense scenes during commercial breaks to plug and preview that night's episode of *Talking Dead*. The comments drawn from *The Walking Dead* subReddit help constitute the anti-*Talking Dead* fan, one that is highly critical against Hardwick and the show, while still retaining the passion of being a committed fan to the scripted television series and mythology surrounding *The Walking Dead*. These fans express through their rhetoric a hierarchical account of *The Walking Dead* fans. In this section, I draw upon Gray's (2003) definition and classification of the anti-fan to discuss the fan-driven comments via social media that criticize the purpose, format, and host of the live after-show.

A common misconception about anti-fans is that they lack any attachment or feelings toward a given fandom. However, this not the case. Jonathan Gray (2003) defined the anti-fan "not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, [who] consider it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (p. 70). Anti-fans differ from non-fans, in their intense involvement and essential identity as exclusively a fan of the show, because the latter "likely have a few favorite programs and are fans at other times, but spend the rest of their television time grazing, channel-surfing, viewing with half-interest, tuning in and out, talking while watching and so on" (p. 74). Fan studies address the lengths that fans go to pledge allegiance to their given text, and so should the level of

dedication depict the actions of anti-fans alike. In my analysis of the Reddit forums about *Talking Dead*, there were a sizable amount of discussion threads, or portions thereof that expressed hatred of, or intense dislike for, *Talking Dead*. What I found interesting is that while the anti-fans of *Talking Dead* quite frankly express their negative feelings toward the show, they still express their love for the source material (e.g., the TV show *The Walking Dead* and even the comic book of the same name). Gray notes that the anti-fan “clearly constructs an image of the text and, what is more, an image they feel is accurate – sufficiently enough that they can react to and against it” (p. 71). The anti-fans of *Talking Dead* do not just direct their hatred and dislike against the broadcast carte blanche; rather, the narratives craft an identity that reaffirms their own, more esteemed position among the *The Walking Dead* fans and articulate why shows like *Talking Dead* miss the mark in terms of offering fans an additional outlet for participation. The anti-fans tend to level their criticisms against two main foes: AMC for their guest selection and the missed opportunities for engaged discourse, as well as personal attacks against Hardwick for ruining their immersive viewing experience. The following sections will examine both targets.

Anti-Fans against *Talking Dead* Unite

A Reddit user began a discussion forum by asking other Redditors if they should watch *Talking Dead*. One anti-*Talking Dead* fan describes the show as follows: “Imagine you’re interested in something and someone else wants to be interesting, but knows nothing, yet they keep blabbing on about what they supposedly know” (Hotcereal, 2013). Other anti-fans leveled their own criticisms against *Talking Dead* and suggested that watching and supporting the show seems to “cheapen *The Walking Dead* and makes it feel like a game show with the audience yelling and screaming at the beginning” (MisterCheeks, 2013). The rhetoric from the anti-fans depicts an “us versus them” dichotomy that reinforces their own fan position in *The Walking*

Dead fandom as more genuine and authentic. The Reddit community of anti-*Talking Dead* fans grew increasingly critical when it became apparent that the celebrity guests were not fans: “I mean, I understand why they have random people, they are trying to make it seem like EVERYONE even celebrities watch *Talking Dead*. But when you can tell the celebrity doesn’t watch the show it is pretty lame” (Jeans47, 2013). Moreover, the anti-*Talking Dead* fans viewed the celebrity guests that AMC selected merely as a vehicle for self-promotion, disregarding their contributions to the discussion. This hierarchical position of anti-*Talking Dead* fans is very critical of the rationale for why such a show should be created when fans are already discussing the series with others via social media outlets and face-to-face in a more competent matter. These Redditors questioned the usefulness of *Talking Dead*: “It’s basically water cooler talk that I can do myself with my coworkers the next day. And we have more insightful observations” (Advictoremopolias, 2013). From the Advictoremopolias’ comment we can see the everyday appeal of discussions that can occur around a television show, but the focus is instead on the depth and quality of these interactions. Just because a celebrity is a fan of a show, does that justify broadcasting them talking about it? For the anti-fans, their value judgments are found throughout Reddit and tend to highlight the show’s failed and wasted possibilities as demonstrated in the following:

Talking Dead could have been such a great show, but their choices in guests are awful! They’re usually unfamiliar with the show or marginally aware of one or two episodes. My husband and I have been watching every Sunday and love *The Walking Dead*, but the *Talking Dead* holds nothing of interest to us (Goose_pooper, 2012)

Clearly, these fans are committed to the series *The Walking Dead* yet feel as though *Talking Dead* is missing out on important opportunities to devote an entire timeslot on AMC to airing these underwhelming discussions.

Another missed opportunity that anti-*Talking Dead* fans point out centers on the type of questions that both fans and celebrities choose to ask during the broadcast. One way that the anti-fans separate themselves from the *Talking Dead* fans is to discredit the performance of the celebrity guests by referring to their performance as an “amateur hour” (Ummk789, 2012). Other anti-*Talking Dead* fans drew support from Reddit by pointing out that “they could have literally pulled two random fans from this subReddit and they would’ve been better than the two guests” (CommanderFemShep, 2012). This comment acknowledges that the quality posts and discussions in the subReddit on average exceed that of the guests on *Talking Dead*. The hierarchy established is critical against AMC and their decision to not be representative of the quality of discussion that fans of *The Walking Dead* produce on Reddit or other social media platforms.

Other anti-*Talking Dead* fans directed their criticism against those non-affiliated celebrity guests-as-fans of *The Walking Dead* in the following:

I think *Talking Dead* is entirely pointless. One of two things always happen: 1) they bring on a member of the cast/crew/producers and ask them a whole bunch questions that they can’t answer and 2) they bring on some celebrity with zero connection to the show and say very general comments (Piratiko, 2012).

Here we are presented with a dilemma from both supporters and critics of the celebrity guests. Those fans that support *Talking Dead* have the potential to identify with a celebrity guest who may have a similar viewpoint as them, despite their lack of involvement and connection to the

AMC franchise. On the other hand, those anti-*Talking Dead* fans seem concerned with the lack of insights to be gained from the broadcast. The producers and actors involved with *The Walking Dead* are unable to give away spoilers about upcoming episodes or seasons and can only vaguely hint at certain plot developments. The anti-fans' rhetoric, however, suggest that they do not see anything of value by watching celebrities-as-fans discuss *The Walking Dead*. The anti-*Talking Dead* fans suggest that *Talking Dead* waters down their commitment when a guest admits that they are not familiar with *The Walking Dead* universe in terms of reading the comic books or knowing general background information about *The Walking Dead* mythology. As one anti-fan replied when Drew Carey admitted that he never read the comics: "I'm so glad that Drew Carey is on *Talking Dead*. He has so much to do with the show itself. Oh I get it; he's a fan of the show...and a celebrity! So he gets to be on *Talking Dead*. This guy has never even read the comics" (GravyDavy78, 2012). These comments highlight that the wasted opportunities to reflect background knowledge, rather than ignorance of celebrity guests, are too great to support *Talking Dead*.

Other anti-*Talking Dead* fans point out their frustrations and criticisms against an individual's fascination with celebrity culture:

I think [*Talking Dead*] is horribly shitty. Usually it seems like it is made up of more commercials than air time. And so often the people on the show have absolutely nothing to do with the show. I don't give a shit what some chick from *Community* thinks about the show. I haven't found anything on the show to be worth watching the whole show, the only thing that is actually interesting is their sneak peeks [of the upcoming episode] and even those are available on YouTube (GravyDavy78, 2012)

For this Redditor, the payoff of seeing the preview clip from the upcoming episode is not worth watching *Talking Dead* because the preview clip can be found using another online venue saving both time and/or possible frustration.

One type of fan engagement during *Talking Dead* comes from fans submitting a tweet on Twitter using the episode-specific hashtag. Hardwick, usually during the second half of the episode reads, from a list of a few fan submissions. For example, in the Season 2, Episode 3 broadcast of *Talking Dead*, Hardwick introduced the episode-specific hashtag as #HeadlessPets, detailing a plot point with the series antagonist, The Governor. Hardwick presented the segment as follows:

So I want to go through some of the hashtags and some people wrote in some stuff.

We're going to do these every week because they've been super fun so far. So this is from @LoganSummerland: So is that considered animal cruelty #HeadlessPets. A lot of people got upset over that. @NascarWonka: The #HeadlessPets were more loyal than Lori? And 'Do you think #HeadlessPets will be the new must have gift for the holidays from @EmoticonPoetry. Yeah, so we're going to do more hashtags next week.

The hashtag segment has become a staple in the format of *Talking Dead*, but for the anti-fans, the process of submitting a tweet or a question to *Talking Dead* became characterized as more of a hassle than a benefit. Consider the following exchange on the subReddit forums:

Roughcaster: I liked that Hardwick made it obvious how shitty he thought the witty Twitter remarks were. [In deadpan] "That's cute"

Funfungiguy: I think the whole hashtag thing is dumb anyway. Of course I don't do Twitter, so maybe I'm just dumb.

Xlation: I appreciate the cleverness that comes from it; however, the last couple has been oh so very forced

Funfungiguy: You might be right. The first couple times, I didn't know what hashtags even meant, because I don't know how to use Twitter. By the time I figured out what was going on, they were getting cheesy like you said.

Granted, there will likely be some learning curve when a newer technology is involved, but the above discussion illustrates that for these anti-fans the entry ways for fans to participate, including submitting a witty tweet, is dwindling and only used for a brief laugh. These anti-fans then would rather avoid participating in the show if their only selected contribution was a witty tweet exploited for laughter.

Television shows like *Talking Dead* work best when they are not compared to other late night talk shows. The rhetoric produced from some of the anti-*Talking Dead* fans view all late night shows as one in the same – a promotional outlet designed to plug their creative endeavors and boost ratings for *The Walking Dead*. Consider the following:

[Last night's show was] very disappointing. It's a good show when they have actors or other creative people involved with the show to discuss behind the scenes details, character development and plot points. There isn't any point bringing up famous people who add nothing to the discussion. Who gives a shit what they think? Why would their mindless dribbling matter? Just because they've been on TV before? It's a great show when executed properly; tonight's episode was a train wreck that just reeked of Jay Leno type bullshit to help sell whatever project these people had going (Redundantrail, 2012).

The anti-*Talking Dead* fans desire additional insights and access, but they'd much rather view the material on their own terms, or discuss *The Walking Dead* with other Redditors, than be

forced to view from some celebrity's perspective. The payoff simply is not worth it. The anti-fans believe themselves to be fans of *The Walking Dead* to the degree that they can sniff out fake celebrity guests who tend to conflate their interest in and knowledge of the series. Also, the anti-fans are adamant about turning their backs on a show that they feel wastes their time and tarnishes the object of their affection. Through their comments via social media, the anti-fans are rhetorically constructing their dislike of the show while also constructing their identity as fans rhetorically.

Haters against Hardwick – Ruining Fans Immersive Experience

In 2014 *Rolling Stone* named Chris Hardwick “the king of nerds” (Thorp, 2014). Yet despite all the success he has had bringing popular culture into the forefront of our public culture, he has also been the subject of fan backlash, particularly those fans who blame him for ruining their viewing experience of watching *The Walking Dead*. Shows like *The Walking Dead* are known for their scenes of intensity where fans go by the motto that “no character is safe”, all of which creates a tense and engrossing viewing experience. As soon as the scene ended and before segueing into the sponsored commercials, the screen would cut to Hardwick in the *Talking Dead* studio urging fans to tune in to an all-new episode of the broadcast immediately following *The Walking Dead*. Consider the following:

The *Talking Dead* segments kill immersion. When I'm immersed and watching Glen [a character on *The Walking Dead*] going through the emotional moments, the last thing I want to see is a quick cut to him out of character talking about his opinion on Glen and his emotional moment. I'm complaining about *Talking Dead* breaking the third wall of *The Walking Dead* during *The Walking Dead* episodes (DubPac, 2013).

One of the most prominent complaints from the Redditors was directed towards the *Talking Dead* promos, especially since they were usually broadcast right after a dramatic moment on the show. As one anti-*Talking Dead* fan points out: “I can’t stand it when there is a really poignant or dramatic scene, then suddenly some asshole is screaming a hashtag at me” (Gamer81, 2012). Gamer81’s and other similar anti-Hardwick sentiments get at fans who want to exert a sense of control over their viewing experience of the show. Hardwick’s promos serve to remind fans that AMC, as a commercial business, is still in control of presenting the final format of *Talking Dead*.

For the anti-fans like Gamer81, the commercial cut-ins ruin their immersive viewing experience. Some anti-fans posted alternative ways to get around these *Talking Dead* promos: “I can’t stand him, so I watched the first season on my computer, the second on Netflix and the first half of the third on my computer again. If I didn’t have to wait to download or get it off of Netflix, I sure as hell wouldn’t watch it on AMC. It’s a total mood killer and takes you out of the moment” (Tandran, 2013). For these anti-*Talking Dead* fans, the ideal environment is the sanctity of watching the broadcast in its entirety without being reminded to tweet using the episode’s hashtag – because their rhetorical identity as *The Walking Dead* fans does not include ancillary actions like tweeting or being reminded by Hardwick to do “x”.

Because the anti-*Talking Dead* fans are restricted by AMC in terms of watching *Talking Dead* according to their terms, the criticisms against AMC quickly deteriorated into personal attacks against Hardwick’s character:

The host is unbelievably annoying to me and I can’t stand the idiot when something bad happens on the show and it cuts to a commercial of him ruining the mood by screaming at us what the retarded hashtag of the week is (Ryanthepostmaster, 2012).

I cannot freaking stand it when something amazing happens in *The Walking Dead* and instead of cutting to commercial it cuts to Chris Hardwick being goofy. It just ruins the entire mood...I would wish AMC would stop cutting directly to him after something major happens in the show. It really kills the mood for me (BruceWinslow, 2013).

Hardwick, during an episode of *Talking Dead*, attempted to alleviate some of the frustrations that *The Walking Dead* fans' expressed about how the placement of the *Talking Dead* promos ruined their viewing experience. He began: "Let's read some hashtags. By the way, the hashtag #teamprison came right after the scene with the Governor and Maggie. I don't place the hashtag spots, so many people were like 'Why did you have to come on after that awful scene,' and I was like, I don't have that much power at the network". Hardwick, despite being the host of *Talking Dead* attempts to frame his persona by aligning and identifying himself with the fans in order to deflect the blame and criticisms against AMC. This is Hardwick's attempt at face-saving, as he wants the fans to blame AMC rather than himself. This is a savvy move on behalf of Hardwick, and the sentiment resonated among the *Talking Dead* fans on Reddit. Consider a few of the justifications that the Redditors expressed about Hardwick's reveal (2012):

Icameliac: Chris Hardwick frequents this subReddit and since people have been complaining about his outbursts he has toned it down a lot.

Sararosered: Well at least Hardwick stopped yelling at us during the lead up promos when the show airs

Willmiller82: He actually apologized for this a couple weeks ago and since then you can tell they made an effort to have him start his commercials a little quieter. I believe he explained that when they do the original recording it is not loud but the studio turns the volume up on all the commercials

Blueoak777: I know, this proves that he really listens to the audience (us too maybe?)

Mrawesomepants: I fucking hate that host. Every time *The Walking Dead* cuts to commercial after a really intense scene, the first thing I hear is that idiot's annoying voice making some pun or laughing.

Withforte: You realize he has no control over that, and it's AMC's call as to when they drop in the *Talking Dead* promos. He's subscribed to this subReddit, so don't hurt his feelings

Mrawesomepants: Well that does make me feel a little bad for saying that. I didn't know. I am sorry Mr. Hardwick if you are reading. However it is still irritating. Does he know that?

Joywalker23: He actually said something about that recently on Twitter that he has no idea when the promo is going to pop up and that he hates how it always comes on after an intense scene and ruins it

Darkknight101: Yes he does know people don't like it but he also said himself that he has no control over this stuff

What these extended examples illustrate is that despite the negativity surrounding Hardwick's personality and the interruptions from the *Talking Dead* promos by AMC, some fans continued to show support for Hardwick and the persona that he crafted in his narratives both on *Talking Dead* and on social media. Some Redditors have been able to identify with Chris Hardwick, and as I have argued in this chapter, they have supported his decisions and his hosting of *Talking Dead*. *Talking Dead* fans are a portion of the larger overall *The Walking Dead* fan base, but through their posts on Reddit, they are participating in an engaged form of fandom. Despite not overtly boasting about their individual comments being acknowledged during the broadcast,

many of these Redditors make time to watch *Talking Dead*, and frame it as an important part of their viewing experience. In the next chapter, we will explore those instances on *Talking Dead* when the prescribed rules and protocol break down and the guests fail to conform to the rules of decorum established by AMC.

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Chapter 4 - Fandom on Their Own Terms: Violations of Decorum

Introduction

Rules that guide our everyday behaviors are commonplace. These rules, when violated, usually hold some type of consequence. While there are exceptions to the rules, they are ingrained in us so that we follow them without paying them too much attention. Take for instance comic book fandom. Certain behaviors preclude individuals from gaining access to, or being a part of, a comic book event. Having personally attended conventions for almost 20 years, I have witnessed many of these unspoken rules violated. When I first started attending comic book conventions there was an unofficial sense of etiquette, where individuals judged their behaviors against a set of commonsense assumptions on how to properly conduct themselves while interacting with others during the convention. These actions included respecting another's sense of space while walking down a crowded convention aisle, being mindful of the number of items autographed at a booth, and being respectful to fellow convention-goers. These rules helped to maintain some semblance of order in an already chaotic weekend dominated by the individuals celebrating all things fantastical and otherworldly.

I have witnessed arguments erupt when someone tried to cut in front of a signing line, and I have seen disgruntled convention goers who, after waiting in line for a couple of hours, leave empty-handed when the actors/artists never showed or had to leave early. Regardless of these anecdotal examples, the rules of appropriateness were regularly maintained and followed by those who attended. As the years passed, the popularity of comic book conventions have

increased exponentially as box office profits from superhero films¹⁴ have made some comic book conventions, like San Diego's Comic-Con International, almost impossible to attend¹⁵.

Nowadays, comic book convention websites provide an official set of rules on their homepage, explicitly stating appropriate codes of conduct and guidelines that all participants must follow. Take for example the rules for Chicago's Comic and Entertainment Expo, or C2E2 convention: "C2E2 staff and security have the right to ask you to leave C2E2 and refuse to refund the cost of your badge if you are behaving in an inappropriate manner" (C2E2, 2016). While these commonplace rules may be easily followed, they nonetheless highlight the productive element of power: these rules highlight appropriate forms of behaviors designed to provide participants with the opportunity to maximize their convention experience. Even though there are certainly punitive dimensions of the C2E2 rules, they are constructed to ensure that attendees are safe and responsible during the convention. When one abides by these rules, their actions help reinforce the appropriate levels of decorum surrounding the convention. Clearly, even though the abovementioned anecdote depicts comic book fandom, the prevalent microprocesses of power pervade much of our public life.

Michel Foucault, throughout his body of scholarship, illustrated the ubiquitous presence of power found in daily interactions. In his *History of Sexuality Volume 1*, Foucault (1990) stated that "Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (p. 93). Foucault's theory on power went beyond the negative and repressive

¹⁴ 2015's *Marvel Avengers: Age of Ultron* had worldwide box office sales in excess of \$1.4 billion (Box Office Mojo, 2016). The Hollywood Reporter stated that *Avengers: Age of Ultron* marked the third Marvel franchise motion picture, along with the first *Avengers* film and *Iron Man 3* to exceed \$1 billion in box office sales (McClintock, 2015).

¹⁵ On February 20, 2016, The San Diego Union-Tribune reported that the 2016 Comic-Con badges sold out of the 130,000 badges in less than an hour. The story continued to express the frustration felt by fans: "Badges for each of the four days are doled out randomly via an online waiting room, but every year demand far exceeds the number of tickets available for purchase...it is unlikely there will be another opportunity to purchase tickets".

dimensions toward the productive features that stem from its use. In *Power/Knowledge* (1980), Foucault furthered his conception of power away from solely repressive means in the following:

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse (p. 119).

This chapter frames a Foucauldian definition of power in order to analyze the various disciplinary techniques employed and regulated by AMC, via host Chris Hardwick, to reinforce a specific type of fan identity on the television show *Talking Dead*. This fan identity is narrowly defined, yet largely agreed upon, and strictly enforced according to ambiguous notions of appropriateness. These rules promote a productive element of fan engagement and are publicly praised on the live broadcast, yet when violated, they cast a shadow upon the subjective quality of appropriate fan behaviors.

Fandom, according to *Talking Dead*, is something then that must be subscribed to and enacted in a certain way. *Talking Dead*, as a specialized subset of *The Walking Dead* fan base, has created such a space where fandom is not celebrated carte blanche. Users, participants, and guests must follow guidelines and behave according to the norms established by *Talking Dead* producers and AMC. To be sure, these fan behaviors have largely gone unquestioned and throughout the broadcast of the live after-show, fans and celebrity guests alike have performed their roles without much pushback from the likes of AMC and Chris Hardwick. This chapter analyzes two episodes from *Talking Dead* as exemplar case studies where these rules were broken and the celebrity guests defined fandom on their own terms. The first case study came

from the second season of *Talking Dead*, featuring comedienne Sarah Silverman and musician Joel Madden as the celebrity guests. The second example, from the third season of *Talking Dead* featured musician Marilyn Manson, celebrity Jack Osbourne, and executive producer of *The Walking Dead*, Gale Anne Hurd. These case studies were drawn from the number of unique forums posted to *The Walking Dead* subReddit¹⁶ along with the number of media outlets that commented on the strange and cringe-worthy moments from Silverman, Madden, and Manson. These examples stood out in stark contrast from the other guests who had appeared before and after – creating a unique opportunity to examine the techniques that could be used to return a sense of normalcy to *Talking Dead*, and in turn, meet the audience’s expectations of critiquing and dissecting the episode in great detail.

In this chapter I argue that AMC, Chris Hardwick, and *Talking Dead* fans use disciplinary rhetorical strategies in order to sustain levels of decorum during the live broadcast. Disciplinary rhetorics, according to Scott (2003) are “discursive bodies of persuasion that work with extrarhetorical actors to shape subjects and to work on and through bodies” (p. 7). The power enacted by AMC and Chris Hardwick is reinforced by fans on social media with an emphasis on maintaining a productive atmosphere to discuss all things related to *The Walking Dead*.

Chris Hardwick, as early as the end of the first season of *Talking Dead*, has been hailed by the media as “the front man of nerd culture” (Karlan, 2012). Karlan explains how Hardwick attains such a rebranding of his career in the following:

¹⁶ When researching *The Walking Dead* subReddits that directly related to *Talking Dead*, I noticed a large number of independent forums that highlighted the strange and awkward behaviors of Sarah Silverman, Joel Madden, and Marilyn Manson. These forum topics included titles such as: Does Anyone Think Sarah Silverman Ruined *Talking Dead* Last Night (2012); Silverman Ruined Tonight’s *Talking Dead* (2012); I Found Tonight’s Episode of *Talking Dead* Hard to Watch (2012); Marilyn Manson, Why Did you Get so Tanked? (2013); Marilyn Manson was a Train Wreck on *Talking Dead* (2013); and, Marilyn Manson is Hands Down the Worst Guest *Talking Dead* has Ever Had (2013).

Today, Hardwick, 40, is the founder and chief creative officer of Nerdist Industries, a Los Angeles multimedia venture he runs with CEO Peter Levin that comprises a nerd culture site, podcasts, newsletters, live events, and Nerdist Channel on YouTube. His rebranding has resulted in packed 800-plus-seat theaters as his stand-up comedy shows, brisk sales of his nerd self-help book, *The Nerdist Way*, and – most deliciously – landed him the hosting gig of AMC’s *Talking Dead*. Hardwick’s manager refers to him as the Ryan Seacrest of nerds because he took the power back and gets to make things that he wants to make.

Chris Hardwick’s use of disciplinary techniques during the first case study relied more upon his use of humor and sarcasm to help reign in the off-the-wall and disjointed comments made by both guests. Hardwick’s persona as a comedian and popular culture expert dominated the episode and played to his benefit by amplifying his own commentary while simultaneously oscillating between the roles of host and guest. Hardwick’s own analysis was used as a stopgap to fill in the silence and awkward comments uttered by both Silverman and Madden.

As will be explained in this chapter, Hardwick’s usual jovial personality shifted during the second case study where his disciplinary tactics revolved more around silencing Marilyn Manson’s voice and publically discrediting him during the broadcast. These two episodes of *Talking Dead* were discussed at length and ranked by fans on Reddit as some of the lowest moments thus far on *Talking Dead*. As one Redditor noted about Manson’s performance: “Is he this year’s Sarah Silverman” (Bacon29, 2013). Manson’s train wreck performance resonated among the Reddit *Talking Dead* fans and became a rallying call to strengthen *The Walking Dead* fan community online.

In order to support my claim, I provide excerpts from the two episodes that highlight the discursive strategies Hardwick used to maintain decorum during the broadcast. I also focus on fan responses via *The Walking Dead* sub-Reddit in order to gauge how social media fans used disciplinary techniques to reinforce more appropriate conceptualizations of fandom.

Case Study #1 – Sarah Silverman and Joel Madden

On the sixth episode from the second season of *Talking Dead*, Chris Hardwick welcomed comedienne Sarah Silverman and musician Joel Madden to discuss *The Walking Dead* episode “Hounded”. This episode’s violation of decorum marked the first time during the series that celebrity guests failed to follow the formula of critiquing and theorizing about the popular zombie series. Hardwick’s persona, as a fellow comedian and host, attempted to gently guide topics of conversation back to the episode by taking control at the forefront of the episode’s discussion. In order to explain how both Silverman and Madden violated the show’s decorous space, I highlight those instances during the show’s broadcast where the discussion veered off track. Hardwick utilized three disciplinary strategies to regain the upper hand in the episode. These strategies include: 1) seeking clarity and probing the guests to explain their logic; 2) ignoring both Silverman and Madden’s tangential comments by inserting his own voice and analysis; and, 3) using sarcasm and humor to divert the awkward situations. *Talking Dead* fans, via *The Walking Dead* subReddit, also engaged in various disciplinary rhetorics pointing out the inauthenticity of Silverman and Madden’s performance during the broadcast.

At the start of the episode, the audience was presented with conflicting emotions from Hardwick. As is usually the case, Hardwick provided a brief summary, or talking points, of what had just occurred during the episode of *The Walking Dead*. Hardwick began by addressing the audience, saying “That was an insane episode and on tonight’s show to deal with it with us is

Joel Madden and Sarah Silverman. I'm Chris Hardwick, and this is *Talking Dead*". This standard boilerplate helps set the scene, introduce the guests, and provide a brief synopsis of what the guests will talk about. However, about a minute into the broadcast, Hardwick informed his audience about the tone of his delivery at the top of the show: "I was almost inappropriately laughing at the beginning of the show because two seconds before the show Sarah was like 'Chris I'm pregnant and the baby is yours'". Even though this was a minor instance, a joke from a comedienne to a comedian, given the seriousness of the episode, the stark juxtaposition of serious tone to an inappropriate joke, did not aid in creating a somber atmosphere created by *Talking Dead*. The audience laughed, but the placing and timing of the joke was off. Rhetorical scholar Robert Hariman (1992) drew upon Aristotle's classical definition of decorum as "the fitting of style to emotions, character, and content of the speech, and remarks that all the other rules of style have [both] timely and untimely uses" (p. 153). Silverman's joke at the beginning of the episode, in an attempt to throw off Hardwick's introduction, was untimely. Moreover, Silverman's joke violated the rhetorical term *kairos*, or the balance and symmetry established in a rhetorical situation, framed on *Talking Dead*. Silverman's persona as a comedienne who regularly pushes the boundaries of appropriateness and taste with her standup is well known, but Silverman as a fan of *The Walking Dead* was something that needed to be clarified and regulated.

Fans, via *The Walking Dead* subReddit, voiced their concerns and complaints against both Silverman and Madden's performance on *Talking Dead*. Some fans criticized Silverman's humor as a distraction from the purpose and tone of the show: "She kept trying to do standup comedy instead of talking about the show" (Amyorainbow74, 2012). Others were critical of

Silverman's personality: "Whenever she tries to come up with a creative idea of her own, it's either a blatant attempt to be inappropriate and/or full of shit" (Ernie1850, 2012).

Another element that contributed to violations of decorum was the level of unpreparedness that both Silverman and Madden exhibited when Hardwick asked questions or for their opinion about a specific scene. One example that emphasized this level of unpreparedness and confusion occurred around the 4-minute mark when Hardwick asked Madden why he thought the character of Maggie sat quietly and did not acknowledge the other characters in the scene:

Hardwick: Why did you think she just sat there?

Madden: Because she didn't know who they were. And she's kind of a... solo. Kind of, rolls on her own. You know, she was just like watching it all go down. You know, she's kind of like one of those, a good noble...person, but she she's also looking out for herself.

Madden's response seemed indicative of speaking generally about Maggie's character traits instead of commenting on the scene from the character's perspective. Later on during the episode, Hardwick attempted to engage Madden about the series' villain, The Governor, who was having a romantic relationship with one of the main characters of *The Walking Dead*.

Silverman answered instead and said:

Silverman: I'm much more into Andrea and The Governor having sex that was like...

Madden (Interrupting Silverman): Especially when he says "hell yeah"

Hardwick: Hell yeah?

Madden: Yeah, when he said that, I was like "hell yeah" (Madden laughing). That was like my favorite line in the whole episode

Madden's sophomoric use of sexual innuendos was in contrast to Hardwick who attempted to discuss the motivations and implications of the character's relationship. Hardwick's attempt to parrot Madden's "hell yeah" in a southern drawl yielded light laughter from the audience, but when the conversation attempted to move forward, Madden reiterated the "hell yeah" comment one final time in saying that it was his favorite line of the episode. Stylistically, Madden's willingness to inject humor at that specific time was not reciprocated by Hardwick. Hardwick, in turn, allowed Silverman to finish her statement before transitioning to a behind-the-scenes clip regarding the makeup of the series.

Silverman's laissez faire attitude regarding the cast of *The Walking Dead* provided another situation where decorum was violated. Silverman's authenticity as a *The Walking Dead* fan was flagged as skeptical from the Redditors in the following:

Silverman: This is the first time I'm going to say this, I don't know if this is taboo but, like, I love *The Walking Dead*. But, it's the first show that I have loved this much where I have not up till now really cared about any of the characters.

Hardwick: Really? This is the first episode?

Silverman: But now I'm really into The Governor, and I'm really into Michonne.

Hardwick: Well, this is a good point that you bring up, and we can talk about it in the next segment.

Hardwick seemed surprised that Silverman now aligned herself with caring for and identifying with the main series' villain. Conversations on Reddit highlighted this particular exchange as evidence of Silverman's inauthentic fan status. As one fan commented "I think 'Hounded' was the first episode she's ever seen and she just faked her way through the whole thing. She didn't even know basic zombie stuff" (BlueOak777, 2012). Other fans took up similar complaints in

Silverman's performance: "Honestly, Sarah Silverman couldn't like or relate to any of the characters because she's never seen the show. She can deny it all she wants, but it was so obvious" (Kitsune013, 2012). Some Redditors injected sarcasm to critique Silverman's noncommittal answers: "Example of Silverman's answer: 'I really never liked any of the characters before this last episode, and now each one is my favorite when you remind me what their name is again'" (Funfungiguy, 2012). Silverman not identifying with any *Walking Dead* characters, despite the show having been on air for three seasons, became a tipping point for the Redditors that she might be faking her way through the broadcast. These fans' comments pointed out the egregious sin of not presenting a fan-forward identity. Given the amount of similar comments found on Reddit, the *Talking Dead* fans were not as patient with her performance as Hardwick initially was, and took great offense that she was considered a super-fan of the show: "Honestly, Sarah Silverman couldn't like or relate to any of the characters because she's never seen the show. She can deny it all she wants, but it was painfully obvious to us" (Kitsune013, 2012). These Redditors were not fooled by Silverman's performance.

Throughout the episode, both Silverman and Madden struggled to present themselves as knowledgeable fans, capable to sustain serious commentary about the show. By resorting to sophomoric and scatological humor, Silverman and Madden alienated *The Walking Dead* fan base. While Hardwick's persona as a host was challenged, he attempted a variety of disciplinary strategies to bring fandom back to the forefront of discussion.

Hardwick's Disciplinary Strategies

The *Talking Dead* fans on Reddit rallied around Hardwick's patience and performance as a host as demonstrated in the following:

Xlation: Everyone I know who watched it felt the same way. I felt bad for Hardwick having to deal with that. What a trooper (2012).

ChrisfromDetroit: Yeah, I felt bad for Hardwick as well. The guy's enthusiasm for the show always seems genuine, so watching him have to sit there and force a smile as the other two phone it in is frustrating (2012).

Hardwick's job as a moderator and facilitator of *The Walking Dead* fandom was tested by the inappropriate and uninformed comments made by Sarah Silverman and Joel Madden. Hardwick helped combat this by employing three separate disciplinary strategies to reinforce his ethos as the host and strengthen the conversation.

The first disciplinary strategy used by Hardwick centered on seeking clarification and additional information from both Silverman and Madden. Immediately after the fake pregnancy joke made by Silverman at the start of the episode, Hardwick refocused his attention and asked his guests about a plot point involving the main character, Rick, and mysterious phone calls that he received:

Hardwick: What about the phone conversations? What do they say about what's going on in Rick's head Sarah?

Silverman: I think this is how Rick is coping. I think this is how he's dealing with his loss.

Hardwick: Sure.

Silverman: I mean is he going crazy? I think he went crazy awhile ago and then when he saw the baby... That was the first time I liked Rick to be honest.

Hardwick: Really?

Silverman: Yeah, when he broke down last week.

Hardwick: Well, he had to be this protective shell for so long. But in the comics, the phone thing spans several issues and it really is a big thing and I was just wondering if they were going to get to it in the series. What did it mean to you Joel when he said that ‘We’re dying here.’

Joel Madden: I actually think it quite literally means...they’re dying. That if they don’t leave the prison, it’s going to do them all in.

Hardwick: You think so?

Madden: Yes.

Hardwick: But it’s such a strong hold.

Madden: Yes it’s a stronghold but there’s just something that doesn’t sit right with me. I don’t know. I feel like this phone call is like he’s just communicating with the other side. I feel like he feels like he’s close to on the brink of like being done.

Hardwick: Is it just me? Or is it me as a viewer and watching this group, but how could you get on board for a leader who is mentally cracked and who is trying to deal with stuff that has happened with these weird phone conversations?

Silverman: I don’t know...

At this point in the series, as well as the comic books, *The Walking Dead* fans would be able to have some idea or at least understanding on the importance of the phone calls to Rick. As the extended excerpt suggested, Hardwick, at various stages of the interaction, attempted to restructure the conversation back to these mysterious phone calls.

When the initial question to Silverman did not go in the direction he wanted, Hardwick acknowledged the mental state of the main character Rick, but then asserted his own fan identity about being excited that the television show attempted to bring in a plot point from the comic

book series. After stating his own thoughts on the matter, Hardwick then asked Madden the question, but all he received back was a literal paraphrase of what Hardwick just asked. Hardwick began prompting Madden to elaborate on his answer, but when Madden began talking about Rick's mental state, Hardwick one more time attempted to bring the conversation back to the phone calls. Similar though to the first two times, both guests could not provide him with an answer. Hardwick then shifted topics in the conversation. Hardwick's insistence to clarify and ask for additional information contributes to the use of power toward a productive end. In giving his guests the benefit of the doubt, Hardwick relied upon his ethos as a host to rephrase the question and attempt to reframe the narrative structure for Silverman and Madden. Even though the conversation faltered, Hardwick still sought to maintain fan discussions.

When reframing the questions failed to elicit any productive responses, Hardwick began answering his own questions and using his ethos as the host to discuss and tease out the particulars of the episode. This second disciplinary strategy attempted to regain a critical dimension to the show, apart from Silverman's inappropriate jokes. Hariman (1992) stated that decorum "functions sometimes in a more critical sense, in which the rules or attitude of appropriateness itself becomes a means for the analysis of social drama" (p.165). Hardwick, through this disciplinary strategy, asserted his control over the situation, and elevated himself as the model of proper fan behavior, thus performing both roles as host and guest commentator. Hardwick temporarily avoided resorting to humor and sarcasm (e.g., indecorous stylistic tools already used during this episode by Silverman) at the expense of his guests. His position as the host of *Talking Dead*, coupled with his decorous performance bestowed upon him a sense of power, through his appropriate code of conduct. In general, "a code of conduct emerges by overruling another code – more specifically, by overruling another, putatively lesser version of

itself” (Hariman, 1992, p. 165). Two instances in the episode illustrate Hardwick’s use of this disciplinary strategy.

After a commercial break, Hardwick attempted to engage his guests by discussing the character Carol and her drive and will to survive in a zombie apocalypse. After Hardwick’s initial question was asked, similar to the previous interactions, the long pause was greeted by Silverman with an off-the-wall joke speaking to nothing asked or implied by the question.

Hardwick: What does it say about Carol that she survived in the tombs?

Silverman: (After a 5 second pause) when is Carol’s hair going to grow? This is the most that I’ve liked Carol, I’m really hopeful for what’s going to happen with Carol because last season when she’d come around, even in the zombie apocalypse where everything is so, everything gets into perspective about social like things, it’s even when she comes around, it’s like ‘Oh, ugh, here comes Carol’

Hardwick: No. I think she’s one of the best equipped to deal with the apocalypse with the weird logic that she was in an abusive relationship for years and so now the world is basically an abusive relationship and she knows how to adapt in that scenario. So then on top of that Daryl is turning out to be like a real big brother, father figure to everyone, but I love that moment when he basically says, ‘Oh here’s what happened to my mom’ and Carol without any emotion was like ‘Oh that’s cute, your mom died in a fire, I had to shoot my mom in the face’.

Madden: Yeah, it seems like Carol is now Carl’s mom now.

Hardwick: Really?

Madden: Yeah, like she’s adopted him.

Hardwick: Hmmmm...I don’t know.

Hardwick, instead of letting Silverman continue on or give additional acknowledgement to her random jokes about Carol's hair, offered his own observation into the character's motivations – tying in events from previous seasons which detailed her abusive relationship and speculating that her character would be able to adapt to any situation thrown at her. While it is not uncommon for Hardwick to offer his own opinions on the broadcast about *The Walking Dead*, the amount of description and fan theorizing far exceeded that produced by both Silverman and Madden. Near the end of the exchange, Madden began to offer some insight into the relationship between Carol and Carl, but failed to substantiate his opinions with anything greater than a few words response. Hardwick then fell back to his first disciplinary strategy of changing topics, as neither Silverman nor Madden had any insightful observations that fit within Hardwick's code of conduct.

The second example came when Hardwick interjected himself into the discussion regarding fan shipping – or the relationship between two characters on a television series and the fans that adamantly support it. The conversation took a strange turn, however, as Silverman misunderstood Hardwick's question, thinking that he was asking about Carol and Carl rather than Carol and Daryl. Neither guest could elaborate or productively contribute to speculating this “what if” situation. Coupled with the confusion, Silverman's jokes ended up leading the audience away from the current topic, and seemed to diminish the fan labor and importance related to shipping as illustrated in the following:

Madden: And then Daryl finds Carol who is more like his mom now. I feel like she is like his mom.

Hardwick: Really?

Madden: She kind of like adopted him.

Hardwick: Really? Mom/wife maybe. I keep wanting them [Carol and Daryl] to make out. Like I so want to.

Madden: No.

Silverman: No he's (motion to Madden) talking about Carl.

Madden: Like the mom he never had.

Hardwick: No he's (gesturing to Madden) talking about Carol.

Madden: Carol and Daryl.

Silverman: Oh, I feel like they're twins. They are like turning into each other. Their hair is the same suddenly.

Hardwick: I just so want them to hook up. Like when he found her, I wanted that moment.

Madden: What?

Hardwick: I do. I feel like, yeah because she can sort of fulfill that role for him that he never had. She's a caretaker and you know, I really, I think the two of them could make a pretty sweet couple.

Silverman: They should, it seems right but I won't feel totally satiated to see them make love...

After the initial confusion on the part of Silverman wondering who Hardwick and Madden were actually referring to, Madden refused to acknowledge the possibility in the subtext of the scene hinting at a romantic relationship between Carol and Daryl. Hardwick again shifted his persona from host to fan by proclaiming his support for this "relationship" – but as with the previous example, Hardwick ended up controlling the conversation and spoke to the viewers as a fan-first.

As the episode progressed, Silverman's jokes continued despite Hardwick inserting himself as the guiding voice in the televised fan narrative. As Hardwick's patience wore thin, he resorted to his third and final disciplinary strategy. Up until this point, Hardwick did not use humor or sarcasm against Silverman directly – the humor during the first half of the episode was used as a buffer to switch conversations to some other talking point. Yet, the non sequiturs and offensive comments made by Silverman proved too much to keep Hardwick restrained. One particular exchange between Silverman and Hardwick centered on the character Carl, the son of the main protagonist Rick, who, in order to survive in a zombie apocalypse, had to grow up quickly and deaden his emotions. Hardwick asked his guests to predict what may happen to Carl if the series were to jump ahead about ten years into the future as demonstrated in the following:

Hardwick: Is Carl's death all it would take to turn Rick into The Governor? The only thing tethering Rick to any kind of reality is that baby that he's finally accepted and Carl. What do you think if they were taken away?

Madden: I think he just, I feel like Rick's got to snap out of it, yeah. In short, yes, if Carl died it would be over for Rick.

Hardwick: But I think, for Carl, I'd love to see this show play out for years and I'd just want to see what becomes of Carl. I'm so curious to see if the baby survives and what kind of leader Carl would become. But right now it is time for a sneak peak of the next all new episode of *The Walking Dead*...

Silverman: (interrupting Hardwick prior to the sneak peak of next week's episode) I can guess about Carl.

Hardwick: What?

Silverman: If I were just to guess. First gay president.

Hardwick: I don't have any kind of comment for that Sarah Silverman.

Silverman: I'm sorry.

Hardwick: Not one follow-up comment. I'm just going to let that sit there and fester and breathe.

Silverman: I'm sorry. It just popped into my head I had to make a fast decision because you were already onto the next thing. I'm sorry.

Hardwick: Oh my God that comment is already full of maggots...The next episode of *The Walking Dead* airs next Sunday (transitions to the clip).

Hardwick's reaction to Silverman's comment turned the awkward situation back onto Silverman, who in turn offered up her apologies. Hardwick continued on with his sarcasm, drawing out the conversation for a few additional seconds.

At this stage in the episode, Hardwick's sarcasm, as a disciplinary strategy, spoke to the flexible standards that decorum can take (Kapust, 2011). While decorum may describe predictable patterns of appropriateness, at times being inappropriate becomes the appropriate thing to do. Hariman (1992) stated: "Much of the time when social situations are being reproduced predictably propriety is synonymous with appropriateness. At other times the appropriate thing to do is to be improper. The critic must be alert for this particular distinction between the specific code of propriety and the more general rule of appropriateness, particularly when the meaningfulness of the situation lies in the actors' switching from the one to the other" (p. 164). Hardwick employed sarcasm, initially coded as an indecorous stylistic device when used by Silverman to derail the conversation, to target Silverman's inane comment by letting the comment linger even a few seconds longer. At this moment, Hardwick used his biting sarcasm to align with fans watching *Talking Dead* and to further separate himself from Silverman who

consistently throughout the episode disrespected the sanctity of *The Walking Dead* fans. For some *Talking Dead* fans on Reddit, emotions quickly escalated past sarcasm to personal attacks: “Last night made me hate Sarah Silverman. Who the fuck does she think she is bashing every character on the show? Cracking on Carol’s hair, saying she predicts that Carl’s going to grow up to be the first gay president, etc. Fuck that stupid bitch” (Xaden, 2012). Silverman’s sense of humor for these fans was more than inappropriate; in response, these fans began to hurl insults back on Silverman.

After showing the preview from the next week’s episode of *The Walking Dead*, Hardwick and Madden both expressed concern over the fate of the character Glenn. Silverman instead asked:

Silverman: I love Glenn too. Is Glenn named after Glen who created the show?

Hardwick: Glen Mazzara? No, Glenn is from the comic book. You know the comic book character.

Silverman: Oh yeah that’s right.

Madden: I love Glenn.

Hardwick: The character Glenn? And Glen Mazzara, too, who I think may be in the audience somewhere tonight. Hey Glen, wherever you are.

Hardwick’s pointed response to Silverman’s question highlighted her naiveté towards *The Walking Dead* franchise. Hardwick’s justification that the character, Glenn, was not named after the executive producer, Glen Mazzara, brought the authenticity of Silverman’s fan status under even greater question. When Silverman acknowledged her error, Hardwick could have let the conversation end, but continued to play on Silverman’s confusion by mentioning that Glen Mazzara was actually in the audience. As we saw throughout the episode, Hardwick’s use of

disciplinary rhetoric shifted from seeking clarification and giving his guests the benefit of the doubt, to taking a leading role as both a fan and host, and finally using the stylistic device of sarcasm to separate himself from Silverman while strengthening the alignment with those *The Walking Dead* fans who were frustrated by that evening's broadcast. Hardwick's sarcasm was used as a last resort, and only when the other disciplinary rhetorical strategies failed to produce his desired results. In short, as Hardwick's patience with the celebrity guests (especially Sarah Silverman) grew thin, his sarcasm was used to reaffirm not only his voice as host but more importantly to speak directly and identify with those loyal and engaged fans of *Talking Dead*. The following section will now turn toward the second case study centering on Marilyn Manson's appearance and those disciplinary techniques employed both by Hardwick and the fan community online.

Case Study #2 – Marilyn Manson

Hardwick's Nerdist Industries plugged the third episode of Season 3 of *Talking Dead* as the Halloween inspired episode, not only because it aired a few days before Halloween, but to highlight the horror themed celebrity guests who were scheduled to appear. That evening's guests included shock rocker Marilyn Manson, the "Prince of Darkness" Ozzy Osbourne's son Jack Osbourne, and *The Walking Dead's* executive producer Gale Anne Hurd. Over the course of the broadcast, Hardwick once again was challenged by Manson, who consistently tested Hardwick and the other guests' level of patience by failing to conform to appropriate fan behavior. Gabi Chepurny (2013) from the website TVMix.com described Manson's performance as follows:

Normally the lighthearted response to such a dramatic show is good for a laugh and some thought provoking conversation about how many zombies were just killed. This week

however, Manson took us for an incoherent ride, riddled with off-the-wall references and rambling sentences that eventually took us down the long road to nowhere. The rocker, who is usually an eloquent speaker and adept at showing his intellect, seems to have taken up residence at the funny farm.

During the airing of the episode, “Marilyn Manson” was trending strongly on Twitter – causing fellow panelist Jack Osbourne to tweet “Yep, I know how you all feel” communicating his discomfort and disgust during the broadcast (Chepurny, 2013). Other news outlets reported that Manson’s appearance on the show created an “intriguing level of discomfort between himself and Hardwick” (Hartmann, 2013). Hardwick increasingly used more drastic disciplinary strategies with Manson than he did during the previous season with Sarah Silverman and Joel Madden. Manson’s insistence on performing fandom on his own terms led Hardwick, with the aid of Jack Osbourne and Gale Anne Hurd, to publicly discredit Manson and silence his voice during the broadcast. Hardwick employed three disciplinary rhetorical strategies against Manson, including 1) patiently seeking clarification; 2) using humor and sarcasm; and, 3) willfully distancing from Manson’s position through the use of interruption and disagreement to discredit and alienate his presence from other *The Walking Dead* fans.

Hardwick against Manson – Oscillations of Disciplinary Rhetoric

Hardwick’s persona at the beginning of the broadcast remained consistent with all other episodes before it: enthusiastically ready to discuss the episode. After introducing his celebrity guests using the moniker of super-fans, Hardwick began asking his guests questions about the episode. *Talking Dead* fans on Reddit acknowledged Hardwick’s ability to steer conversations and work with Manson’s wandering comments: “I like how Chris Hardwick tries to sort of gently guide the conversation away from stuff that is just BAD. It didn’t always work, he is

pretty gentle about it, but he doesn't just go along with it either" (The_Bravinator, 2013). Within the first minute of the episode, Manson's first violation of decorum happened when he interrupted *The Walking Dead* executive producer, Gale Anne Hurd, who was answering Hardwick's question about Carol's macabre personality in the following:

Manson: Activia.

Hardwick: Yes, Marilyn Manson, you have a question?

Manson: Activia, she looks like Jamie Lee Curtis.

Hardwick: I'm glad you lead that with Activia Marilyn.

Hurd: You want the walkers to eat probiotics?

Manson: No I'm just saying she looks like Jamie Lee Curtis. She's like the salt and pepper hair, it made me think of Activia, but she seems to be, she was the wildcard.

Hardwick: She was the wildcard, but this entire season she's been not cold, but she's just been logical about what has to be done and Rick is left in this position with "Oh what now". She's obviously not ashamed that she did it. She did what she had to do. What do you think Jack?

Manson's random statement came on the heel of Hurd explaining to the audience the behind-the-scenes process in the writing room, describing how some of the more twisted plot elements are created and conceptualized. When Manson interjected with his "Activia" comment and proceeded to offer no connection, other than how the fictionalized character Carol had a similar hairstyle to actress Jamie Lee Curtis, Hardwick and the audience laughed, but the remainder of the story that Hurd started telling was never finished.

Hardwick then shifted topics after Manson's outburst by targeting Jack Osbourne with his question about Carol. Fans on Reddit praised Hardwick's handling of Manson: "Chris is a great

host, he knows how to professionally steer the conversation” (Bebinn, 2013). Other Redditors praised Hardwick’s patience with Manson: “I take my hat off to Chris; his patience has stretched farther than mine probably would have” (Theblastoff, 2013). One such instance of Hardwick’s patience and ability to paraphrase Manson’s analysis into a workable question came a few minutes after the Activia comment. Manson, through his tangential comments, began defining the rules and expressing fandom on his own terms. While the other guests (e.g., Osbourne and Hurd) continued to discuss Carol, Manson shifted the discussion away from Carol to random topics ranging from morals to physiognomy:

Manson: I love that it’s a zombie show but it’s essentially about morality.

Hardwick: Right.

Manson: And you’ve got Rick Grimes who has, for the most part, tried to do what he thought was right. But in a zombie type situation where there’s no rules, morality kind of goes right back to basics, you know, basic morality. It’s almost biblical, where you have to react, and Rick’s made the mistake of trying to save other people’s children and it has affected him in losing his wife. And then you have Shane, who I like to call criminal ear, because his ear looks criminal. It’s an old study about the shape of people’s ears that make them criminal or not.

Hardwick: We’re deep diving today on *Talking Dead*. I do like this idea about twisted morality here...

Manson: (Interrupting and talking over Hardwick) – I think Rick lost his mind,

Hardwick: His morals?

Manson: No, not his morals, but he really lost it when he had to shoot Shane. Not as much when the wife

Hardwick: Lori

Manson: Yeah, not so much when she died. You know, he couldn't deal with it, and his hat, it's symbolic.

Hardwick: Do you think Carol was justified in burning the bodies Jack?

With this interchange we begin to see power oscillating between the official voice of Hardwick, yet due to Manson's refusal to give up his train of thought, the tension only continued to build as the episode progressed. Foucault observed power "less as something which is possessed but rather as a strategy, something which someone does or performs in a particular context, it needs to be seen as something which has to be constantly performed rather than being achieved" (Mills, 2003, p. 35). Manson's performance of maintaining control over the flow of conversation by interrupting Hardwick was a strategy to maintain the upper hand. Hardwick, however, in commenting that Manson is "deep diving with character study" on *Talking Dead*, bypasses everything Manson just said, to return to asking a pointed question about Carol directly to Osbourne.

Popular online media summarized Manson's appearance on *Talking Dead* as follows: "Manson dominated the show, rambling on and on about...Hitler, ear shapes, bra burning, menstruation, and muttered something about Activia because Carol's short hair reminded him of Jamie Lee Curtis. He was turning the show into *Talking Marilyn*, or at least *Talking Nonsense at Length*" (Wetpaint, 2013). Hardwick's increasing agitation with Manson was evident when he sat down with *Rolling Stone* magazine and recalled the televised event in the following:

He was doing his own thing on the show. It just didn't involve anyone else at all. For the sake of *The Walking Dead* fans, I just started treating him like a heckler at a comedy show so we wouldn't go completely off the rails. He's a smart guy, and I think he's used

to commanding a room. People thought Manson was drunk, but I don't know anything about that; I didn't see him drinking. [I guess] that's what live television is (Wetpaint, 2013).

Hardwick's use of sarcasm increased his persona and ethos as a host which, in turn, countered Manson's violation of decorum during the broadcast. Hardwick's ability to rhetorically identify with his *Talking Dead* fan community illustrates the flexible standards surrounding decorum. Scholars like Deem (1995) suggest that critics "must be alert to indecorous rhetorics in their historical specificities in order to explore their potentialities" (p. 228). So then was the case with Hardwick against Manson that an indecorous style of rhetoric, sarcasm directed at Manson, was used to combat indecorous speech in order to maintain and reestablish a sense of appropriateness as reflected in the following Reddit post:

Hardwick's sarcastic humor resonated well with the *Talking Dead* fans:

I love that Chris was ready to tackle any type of stumble that Marilyn Manson was dishing out left and right. Chris could have come at him hard from the beginning but being the nice guy he let him get away with a couple of his ramblings at first. I also liked how Chris started checking him later on in the episode, and how Manson was waving his arms around like he was a victim. I was cringing and laughing the whole time

(Monkey_News, 2013).

Talking Dead fans admittedly were fed up with the content of the show, but they supported and encouraged Hardwick for doing whatever was necessary to regain control: "He realized that he would win thousands, if not millions, of internet points for pleasing us, and rightly so"

(Sunshinecat, 2013). Fans celebrated via social media Hardwick's shift from patiently waiting

for Manson to finish his thoughts to reasserting his power status as the official moderator of *Talking Dead*. Consider the following:

You can see how Chris Hardwick goes from trying to rationalize what Manson is saying and make it less embarrassing, to realizing that he is not making any sense and just disagreeing and making fun of his crazy comments. I think [Hardwick] was prepared for something like this with Manson as a guest and he deserves some credit for keeping the show on rails (Arabmoney, 2013).

Clearly the *Talking Dead* fan base, despite Manson's ramblings, stood by and supported Hardwick through the strained episode.

At around the 6-minute mark of the episode, Hardwick began to lose his temper and his demeanor shifted toward the avid use of sarcasm as illustrated in the following:

Manson: But I think that Carol is trying to be judge and jury whereas Rick was trying to be more civil, more of a "let's all decide" but then he fell apart, and so then you have someone like her, who's burning those bodies and she's something like a feminist suffragette city, like burning bras and it's not a big deal. I don't think it's personal...

Hardwick: I don't know if burning bras is the same as burning human beings alive.

Manson: No, but I think the recklessness of it is similar. I think she was just making decisions based on her own emotions. She's mad about all the things in her life.

Hardwick: I don't think she's emotional...

Manson: (interrupting Hardwick) I mean, she hasn't gotten laid in awhile. She could be menstruating.

Hardwick: I don't know if I can support those last two theories

Manson: No? But you don't know what's driving her emotions?

Hardwick: I feel like Carol is pretty level headed actually and I feel that she looks at things and says ‘This is what needs to happen. If no one else is going to do it, I’m going to do it’. She didn’t lie about it; she seemed pretty comfortable when she answered yes. The only thing I can’t figure out, was when she broke down, was she upset she didn’t contain the virus, or?

Hurd: I think it’s a combination of things...

Manson, in the span of a few lines, managed to quote a David Bowie song and use gendered language to bastardize the word feminism. Hardwick, rather than letting those comments pass, interjected his stance by denouncing both theories. Here again, Hardwick attempted to insert his power by vocalizing his disagreement with Manson by holding him accountable for his words. Similar to his interactions with Silverman from the previous season, Hardwick offered his own rationale about the character of Carol, before Hurd answered. Hurd, herself a Powers-That-Be as an executive producer, has the power to reveal or withhold certain information about the characters and plot points of *The Walking Dead*. Hurd then maintained a power relationship with Hardwick over Manson and the audience. Foucault (2003) stated that “a power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements that are indispensable if it really is to be a power relationship: that ‘the other’, the one over whom power is exercised, is recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up” (pp. 137-138). Since Hurd then has knowledge that even Hardwick does not possess, she is therefore able to open up new avenues of inquiry, and is thus able to successfully move beyond Manson’s sexist comment.

Hardwick's sarcasm reached a zenith after he read a question from social media. The question asked whether it was important to care about someone during the zombie apocalypse or if survival should be the only thing that matters? Consider the following exchange:

Manson: I think it is almost like in real life, which I like to use zombie as a metaphor, you know. If you're stuck in a situation, get a pencil and piece of paper. You can either write a suicide note, you can stab someone, or wipe your butt with it.

Osbourne: With a pencil? That could hurt.

Manson: You've got limited options so you have to react and live with the situation. But when it comes to survival and loved ones, this is the choice that maybe Rick has made mistakes on. Say you get mad in a different situation: You are mad because someone fornicates with your girlfriend so you want to kill this person.

Hardwick: Right? Are you going to use the pencil that you just wiped your ass with?

Manson: Yes, both. Then you get put in jail and doing no one any good. And I'm not talking about the jail they're in on the show, just a jail in general.

Hardwick: Someone online is writing an algorithm to follow this train of thought.

Manson: There's morality and then there's choices of pragmatism on deciding whether this exists. There's a moral choice and that guy has to die for doing something bad.

Hardwick: Right.

Manson: But if I kill him how much will it mess up things afterwards.

Hardwick: Sure.

Manson: The butterfly effect. Not the movie with Ashton Kutcher, just in general.

Hardwick: I'm glad you pointed out the difference between the two; otherwise, I may have thought you were bringing in Kutcher to this conversation. We have a caller, what's your name and where are you calling from?

At this point during the episode, any pretense of understanding Manson no longer registered with Hardwick. "You can tell he's getting pissed off at Manson's bizarre comments; the sarcasm coming out of his mouth left and right is killing me" (FreePinkman, 2013). Since the sarcasm no longer worked to subdue Manson's outbursts, Hardwick resorted to more overt measures in order to restrain Manson, including vocalizing his frustrations, disagreeing with his statements, and ultimately distancing himself from Manson completely.

Fans on social media noticed the change in Hardwick's demeanor and voiced their support for the host for not just putting up with Manson's tirades. "The episode got way better once he sort of gave up trying to be restrained" (The_Bravinator, 2013). Even the other guests began talking back and pointing out the ridiculousness of Manson's comments. Consider the following conversation when an audience member in the studio asked Gale Anne Hurd a question about what happened to one of the main characters, Tyreese:

Audience Member: I have a question for Gale.

Hardwick: By all means, she's right there.

Audience Member: Tyreese was in the car. He stayed there. What happened to the walkers when they attacked the mega herd?

Hurd: You know, I think Tyreese was planning on giving up and essentially saying, you know, here I am, come and get me. And then he decided. We'll have to see if he can make it through this.

Osbourne: I thought it was more like when your kid wakes you up in the middle of the night and you think, ‘Ugh, do I really have to get up and do this right now’. I actually thought this was what Tyreese was thinking: ‘Do I really have to go and brutally slay about a thousand walkers with an axe’. (The audience laughs)

Manson: I actually thought it was a reverse of *Training Day* with Denzel Washington and Ethan Hawke. And then he had to school him in the car with the PCP and the whatnot and then he just kind of came through in the end. But Tyreese actually was Ethan Hawke - they just flipped the scripts.

Hardwick: Ok, I think everyone’s thinking that.

Manson: That’s my theory.

Hardwick: Gale is there any truth in that?

Hurd: You know what, absolutely, we watched *Training Day* right before we wrote that episode. (The audience laughs)

Manson: Of course you did, of course you did.

Afterward, Hardwick immediately thanked the audience member for asking a question and paid no attention to Manson, or the random film reference that bore no relationship to the scene in question. When Hardwick collaborated with Hurd attacking Manson’s comment, decorum shifted from what was said to the situational factors of how Hardwick responded. Broadly conceptualizing decorum helps “enable critics to consider the interaction between text and its context rather than simply focusing on style” (Atchison, 2012, p. 115). By looking at the occasion, as well as the numerous violations of appropriateness that had already occurred during the broadcast, the context of the situation deemed Hardwick’s behaviors appropriate to regain

Talking Dead as the space to critically analyze *The Walking Dead* – not to be a soapbox for Manson to run the show his way.

Another example of Hardwick’s growing frustration with Manson came after executive producer Gale Anne Hurd talked about the special effects of creating a mega-herd of thousands of zombies. Consider the following exchange:

Manson: Can I say something. The mega herd made *World War Z* its bitch.

Hardwick: The mega herd made *World War Z* its bitch?

Manson: Yeah.

Hardwick: Explain Marilyn Manson.

Manson: Because *World War Z* had all the climbing, they even had Brad Pitt.

Hardwick: Boy, I can’t wait to cover this on *Talking Z*, the after show for *World War Z*.

Osbourne: It’ll be a real short show. (Hardwick laughing)

Manson: The zombie herd gave me the fidgets. It’s almost like the first season when you see a lot of them and you suddenly think, ‘Wow I shouldn’t have meddled with that first one.’ It’s kind of like when you’re at a club and you start a fight with a guy, and you take your jacket off and say ‘I’ve been to jail’, but you haven’t been to jail, and then his friends show up and you have no friends.

Hardwick: Oh!

Manson: I’m just saying.

Hardwick: That story ended sad. But at least I could follow it.

Manson: You told me that story.

Hardwick: I didn’t tell you that story.

Manson: Yeah you did, at the beginning of the show.

Hardwick: Come back and join us Manson.

Manson's decision to bring up the motion picture *World War Z* in order to draw a comparison to *The Walking Dead* violated the decorum of *Talking Dead* because there was no explicit connection to be made. Rather than letting the comment end, Hardwick aggressively suggested this would be an appropriate comment if there was a live after-show of a film. Hardwick replaced Manson's bizarre and unrelated comment with another ludicrous statement indicating that he was fed up with Manson's diatribes. Even Hardwick's final call for Manson to come back to the conversation was empty, as Hardwick, Osbourne, and Hurd continued their discussion without him, thus both silencing and creating distance from Manson's rogue fan mentality.

As we have seen throughout this case study, Hardwick performed a variety of disciplinary strategies toward the productive end of creating good television experiences. As a host of *Talking Dead*, much of the conversation depends on the guests to offer their own analysis and observations. Manson decided to not abide by and follow the flow of conversation and attempted to assert his own fan presence on his own terms. Despite Hardwick oscillating between host and fan, reframing the questions for clarity did not stop Manson from alienating himself from everyone on set as well as many of *Talking Dead* fans on Reddit. Near the end of the episode, there was one final instance where Hardwick paid Manson a compliment to his observation, but even his compliment was laced with sarcasm as indicated in the following exchange:

Manson: The difference between Rick and The Governor is that Rick had his small community locked down. More like a Hitler type situation where he was, they all were afraid of him and he ruled by fear.

Hardwick: You had me until Hitler.

Manson: No, why? I'm just saying that The Governor had Merle, and I just mean like he had everyone run by fear.

Hardwick: Sure...Sure, I got it.

Manson: Rick tried to run it like a democracy...

Hardwick: I'm so excited I actually understand what you're saying! (audience laughs)

Manson: So I think The Governor is going to lead the zombies on a personal vendetta.

Hardwick: I tell you what, if you're right I'm going to be so mad because I've not understood anything else you've said tonight, and this is actually a very good lucid point.

(The audience and Hardwick begin laughing)

Manson: That's a good lucid point?

Hardwick: Yeah, it was a good lucid point.

Talking Dead utilizes disciplinary measures to control appropriate depictions of fandom during the broadcast. These strategies used by AMC and Hardwick are designed to keep the audience and guests entertained while productively critiquing the previous episode of *The Walking Dead*. With these two case studies, the disciplinary strategies shifted from mere clarification and elaboration into more combative means to quell those guests seeking to perform fandom on their own terms. Hardwick used sarcasm as a rallying point to identify with those fans that were turned off by Silverman and Manson's appearance on *Talking Dead*. Furthermore, *Talking Dead* works as a rhetorical text to express the flexible standards of decorum and demonstrates how various microprocesses of power can use something indecorous in order to reframe the focus back toward more appropriate behaviors of fandom.

To summarize, this chapter examined the disciplinary measures that Hardwick and fans employed to critique and combat against the on-air perceptions of inauthentic fan performances.

For the first case study, involving Sarah Silverman and Joel Madden, Chris Hardwick relied upon his comedic background and used humor and sarcasm as disciplinary measures to call out those specific instances where the celebrity-guest(s) failed to live up to the show's and audience's expectations of an appropriate *Talking Dead* guest. For the second case study, Hardwick moved away from humor and sarcasm, and began actively attempting to silence and discredit Marilyn Manson's bizarre commentary and side comments. Also, this chapter explained that fan-involvement and commentary found online within the subReddit forums largely echoed their support for Hardwick who attempted to regain a sense of control and order, which had been the norm for other *Talking Dead* broadcasts.

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Chapter 5 – “We’ll get through this Together”: Supportive Communication in Fan Narratives for Fictional and Real-Life Loss

Introduction

This chapter deals with death, grief, and social support in two very different spheres: 1) the death of a fictional character from *The Walking Dead* and the subsequent online discussions from Reddit, as well as the interactions aired on that evening’s broadcast of *Talking Dead*; and 2) the narrative of social support, empathy, and catharsis that spontaneously erupted on Reddit after the *Talking Dead*’s host, Chris Hardwick, announced the recent death of his father. Both rhetorical narratives contained similar sentiments of sorrow, grief, and loss and became amplified with fans’ use of and reliance upon social media. In this chapter I do not attempt to value fictional grief more so than the actual grief of losing a loved one, but rather, to offer how communication technology contributed to the creation of discursive spaces where fans could direct their emotional appeals and experience some sort of resolution or peace from sharing their stories and expressing their feelings.

Social support is a “multi-faceted concept that includes the ways in which individual well-being and coping are enhanced by involvement in social networks, the perceived availability of help and acceptance by others or the exchange of tangible and symbolic support in interactions between people” (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004, p. 307). Supportive communication across fan communities online has gained traction given the availability of various social media channels and, in particular, television programs like *Talking Dead*. Fans of *The Walking Dead*, over the course of seven seasons, have experienced multiple on-screen deaths of both major and minor characters. While the death of fictional characters is not uncommon in the medium of television and film, *The Walking Dead* fans have multiple arenas to express their grief through sharing information, exchanging stories, and communicating various

levels of support regarding the overall impact that the fictionalized death had on their fandom experience.

On *The Walking Dead* subReddit, fans created forums to solicit feedback regarding which deaths were the most shocking and the most difficult to experience. These mediated spaces provided a forum for fans to grieve and process the information of moving on without the specific character(s) that fans grew attached to. The writers on *The Walking Dead* television program have provided fans with an unpredictable narrative where some fan-favorite characters have exited the show abruptly despite fans' protests to see more screen time from their beloved character. Unlike other scripted dramas airing on television, *The Walking Dead*, via the broadcast of *Talking Dead*, provides an additional opportunity for a variety of fans (e.g., the casual viewer of *The Walking Dead*, those who post fan-related content on social media, those audience members in the *Talking Dead* studio, the celebrity guests-as-fans, and the actor her/himself) with a final chance to say goodbye, and pay their respects to the actor by honoring the legacy and memory of the recently-deceased character. This swan song represents more than just an opportunity for the actor to appear one final time on the *Talking Dead*, but situates and highlights the pathos-driven narratives that fans direct in their rhetorical support for the televised show, often in praise of the actor's performance, and at times, in anger against Robert Kirkman and the creative powers-that-be who are responsible for producing and airing *The Walking Dead*.

Research into mediated forms of social support distinguishes informal online support groups from more therapeutic face-to-face situations. Online support groups "in contrast to counseling and therapy interventions primarily affect participants' personal empowerment rather than bring about specific therapeutic changes" (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008, p.1879). As opposed to therapeutic measures that seek to classify and diagnose, weak ties support

networks (see Wright & Rains, 2013) found both within the Reddit forums and displayed on *Talking Dead* operate rhetorically by sharing in and contributing to the fan-based narratives surrounding *The Walking Dead*.

The Walking Dead creator, Robert Kirkman, stated online that no character is completely safe on the show. In a 2014 Reddit AMA¹⁷ (Ask Me Anything), Kirkman further reiterated this sentiment when a Redditor asked if a character's popularity with fans will make them immune from being killed off:

In my opinion, I feel like characters ripen like fruit. So while I wouldn't say the more popular a character is the more likely they are to die, they do have to reach a certain level of popularity before they've 'earned' the death. No character is too popular to die (Kirkman, as cited in Carbone, 2014).

Kirkman's claim that no character is above being killed off has warranted a sense of uneasiness in the subReddit community, as fans remain unsure if their character will survive. A strong undercurrent within the subReddit forums features discussions of fan support for the actors on the show as well as how the creative decisions impact the overall fan experience and, in turn, affects their lives.

The first section of this chapter highlights the narratives produced from two fan-favorite characters, T-Dog and Hershel, whose on-screen deaths contributed a wealth of fan discussions via social media describing their sense of loss and attachment to these characters. Obviously, seven seasons of *The Walking Dead* has produced more character deaths than those two selected, but I selected these characters for a variety of reasons: First, they are spread out across the television series; second, fan discourse via the *Talking Dead* subReddit emphasized pathos-laden

¹⁷ On Reddit, the AMA (or Ask Me Anything) is similar to an online press conference where, during a designated time, all Reddit users can submit questions on any subject to the interviewee to answer.

narratives of loss and attachment through supportive communication; and, finally, the actors' "swan song" on the televised broadcast of *Talking Dead* publicly depicted the emotional attachment that fans had toward these beloved characters.

T-Dog and Hershel, according to the Redditors, are conceptualized as either major or core characters of the series. As one Redditor commented, the distinction, while subjective, nevertheless connotes meaning in the following:

Just because you don't care about a character doesn't mean they're not a major character.

A major character is any member of the primary group who isn't there purely as background cannon fodder. T-Dog possibly falls into that category since he had zero character development until the episode that he got killed and then his character exposition was posthumous. There are major characters and core characters. Major characters are up for grabs death-wise because in a zombie story the primary way for the story to progress is with a death, and in a harsh survival story, death usually isn't big or heroic. Core characters are the ones that if they die, they have massive impact on the whole dynamics of the show...If Daryl dies we riot, if Rick dies we basically don't have a show anymore, if Michonne died it'd change the whole way the show plays out...You get what I mean? (Cx316, 2015)

The label of "major" or "core" to these two characters might seem subjective, however, consistently on the subReddit forum are the names of both T-Dog and Hershel in *The Walking Dead*.

The second portion of this chapter addresses real life supportive communication from fans on Reddit after Chris Hardwick revealed, at the end of the *Talking Dead* broadcast, his father's untimely death the night before the broadcast aired. What began as a heartfelt message

from Hardwick to the *Talking Dead* subReddit quickly morphed into a space where fans shared their memories of Billy Hardwick and offered consolatory messages to Hardwick. In addition, fans began sharing their own personal stories of loss and offered emotional support for the Reddit community. These somber and empathetic narratives present on the subReddit provide a network of weak ties support for the online fan community.

Situating Social Support Literature into Fan-based Narratives

To the casual viewer of *The Walking Dead*, companion shows like *Talking Dead* might seem like an additional opportunity to cash-in on the popularity and commercialization of the zombie craze pervading our popular mediascape. Yet as we have seen in this dissertation, for those technologically-inclined fans, *Talking Dead* and the subsequent online narratives provide something far more substantive than merely additional show-related content. One specific avenue of solidarity among *The Walking Dead* fans centers on discussions of character death and coming to terms with their favorite actor no longer appearing on the show. The fictionalized deaths carried out on *The Walking Dead* have become one focal point for *Talking Dead* fans, who employ supportive communication to help heal this loss felt within the online community.

I have watched *The Walking Dead* since the first season, and I too have grown attached to certain characters in the series, and have had to come to terms with the loss of characters who are no longer on the broadcast. For example, when the character Hershel died in Season 4, I could not help but feel a sense of loss toward the grandfatherly figure, who oftentimes acted as the show's moral compass. Despite the fictional nature of Hershel, I immediately drew parallels to my own grandfather, who passed away in 2010. *The Walking Dead*, despite being a horror-theme zombie apocalypse show on the surface, very much acts as a human drama where, much like real life, death can quickly and suddenly take away a character that fans have grown quite attached

to. In short, it is not uncommon for fans of television shows to make comparisons from their personal lives to those viewed on the screen.

For television programs like *Talking Dead*, Chris Hardwick extends and mediates levels of social support for the on-air guests-as-fans, by framing his rhetorical messages around healing, empathy and processing the loss together. Yes, it is worth pointing out that these on-screen deaths are fictionalized, however, for some fans online, the emotional content resonates with the community and shows like *Talking Dead* are a much needed resource to help ease the transition and pay proper respect and tribute to the character/actor. In the field of Communication, scholars like Albrecht, Burluson, and Sarason (1992) described social support as the “cornerstone for the quality of human life” (p. 149). The perceived impact of fictional loss communicated by these fans exhibits the need for recognizing social support in conversation with these fans’ narratives. As one Redditor commented on Tyreese’s death in the fifth season of *The Walking Dead*:

Tyreese’s death was particularly striking...just one episode after Beth is abruptly killed off another major developed character is killed. And Tyreese’s death, in particular, really seemed to confront the concept of mortality and the meaninglessness of life head-on. The moment he was bitten we realized his survival was unlikely. Even after his arm was cut off, it gradually set in that we would be losing this character, even after all the struggle and development the show gave him in this episode. This might be the first time the show had really put us in the head space of a character facing their inevitable death
(Vegetable_Fart, 2015)

Fan perceptions of character identification like the abovementioned quote illustrate how fleeting their fictional lives may be. Also, the Redditor’s comment highlights the level of emotional

investment some fans have for the characters on *The Walking Dead*. One such theoretical concept that is useful for discussing how fan communities talk about and experience these on-screen deaths of their favorite characters would be social support. Academic scholarship on social support has continued to gain traction in the field of health communication since Albrecht and Adelman's book *Communicating Social Support* (1987) was published. What follows is a brief overview of the social support literature before segueing into the fan-based narratives of supportive communication surrounding *The Walking Dead* and *Talking Dead*.

Goldsmith and Albrecht (1993) drew upon Albrecht and Adelman's definition of supportive communication, in that support encompasses "conveying acceptance and assurance, providing opportunities for ventilation, suggesting new perspectives on problems, giving information or assistance in skill acquisition or offering tangible assistance" (pp.142-143). Individuals engaged in supportive communication attempt to reduce the uncertainty that is felt in order to "improve an individual's sense that he or she can act on the environment to bring about desirable outcomes" (p. 143). Social support and supportive communication can rely upon verbal and nonverbal communication techniques geared towards optimizing the perception that one is in control over their situation.

Scholars have categorized social support behaviors. For example, House (1981) outlined four types of supportive behaviors: first is emotional support or concerns; second is appraisal support or affirmation/feedback; the third type of support is informational support or directed messages geared toward providing advice or suggestions; and finally, the fourth type of support is instrumental support whereby one is focused on some specific task (e.g., providing physical assistance). These classification typologies are useful when describing the mediated supportive communication enacted both on Reddit and broadcast on *Talking Dead*. The research on

mediated, or online, social support, has gained attention since Braithwaite, Waldron, and Finn's (1999) study on supportive communication for people with disabilities in computer-mediated groups.

Braithwaite et al. (1999) provided a rationale for investigating social support in a mediated environment as beneficial given the time-delay or non-instantaneous response in message forums that allow the opportunity for users to think about and reply to the online queries in the following:

Mediated support offers opportunities for users to engage in other forms of support that may not ordinarily be acceptable in personal interaction. For example, long narratives might be prohibited by the turn-taking rules of face-to-face conversation; however, users in mediated settings have the opportunity to read narrative at their leisure [and] the anonymous nature of mediated support groups may encourage more use of risky messages that might seem too personal or private in other instances (p. 129).

As mentioned earlier, *Talking Dead* devotes on-air space for fans and guests to publicly grieve, process, and celebrate an actor's final appearance on *The Walking Dead*, but those fans across various social media communities can further acknowledge and express their feelings and narratives about processing the death of these fictional characters. This already built-in online fan community engages in supportive communication with other members in order to provide closure, catharsis, or advice surrounding the process of moving forward from both fictional character and real-life death. Consider the following post from one subReddit, of many, who commented on the public forums after hearing that Chris Hardwick's father passed away:

Since this thread on Reddit seems to be a good place to reach you and send out some love and support, I'll just say here that I am very sorry for your loss. Your fans are all thinking

about you in a challenging time. I will be hugging my family extra tight this holiday because of your very helpful reminder (Rogersmith25, 2013).

In their study, Braithwaite et al. provided a typology of supportive behaviors, including information support, tangible assistance, network support, esteem support, and emotional support. Of these various types of supportive behaviors, fans of *The Walking Dead* employed multiple types of support given the specific nature of the conversation both on-air or in the Reddit forums. Given that *The Walking Dead* serves as an entertainment experience, many of the fan narratives expressed empathy over sharing these meaningful interactions with each other. For example, across the subReddit forums, fans will acknowledge their personal connection or attachment toward a particular character's death, and often times, other users will acknowledge their own sorrow by highlighting and adding their own narrative of support expressing those positive qualities of the deceased character.

In one subReddit forum, fans were asked to list the top on-screen deaths that had the largest impact on them. On the forum, Hershel's death impacted many fans personally. Consider the following post: "I agree, Hershel is definitely number one. He was a great character and the peace maker. I'm very close to my father so seeing Beth and Maggie's reactions upset me even further" (Ellagon, 2015). The empathy expressed by Ellagon was echoed throughout the various forums dedicated to fans offering their own personal testimonials in response to the character's death. Empathy in supportive communication includes "stressing the similarity of one person's experiences with another's... [And such] encouragement provides the recipient with hope or confidence". While manifestations of empathy are viewed through Hardwick's rhetoric and via his guests' narratives on *Talking Dead*, it is the unique disembodied space through which mediated social support operates that addresses the cohesiveness expressed among the Redditors.

The online Reddit community offers fictional and real-life support via what Communication scholars (see Adelman & Albrecht, 1987) refer to as weak tie relationships or those supports that operate outside the primary networks of friends and family. These weak ties include “people whose networks do not overlap substantially, have low levels of interdependence, and interact only in limited contexts” (Rains & Keating, 2011, pp. 513-514). Health communication research on weak ties and supportive communication has investigated the degree to which blog contributors reinforce positive levels of personal growth in a mediated environment where strong-tie supportive relationships were absent.

Rains and Keating (2011) in their study of 121 individuals who maintained a blog devoted to writing about their personal experience related to some health condition found that weak ties support was a prevalent component and viable alternative for supportive communication. In the results section of their study, they found that:

Blogging is a novel resource for support because it is computer mediated. Blogs allow asynchronous communication and filter many of the social cues that are present in face-to-face interaction. [The] bloggers felt relatively comfortable sharing their health experiences in their blog and were able to construct messages that prompted support from blog readers...It appears that readers were able to construct supportive messages in the form of comments posted to blogs that encouraged bloggers to feel a greater sense of information and emotional support (p. 528).

The results of the previous study on mediated channels of supportive communication highlight the type of supportive behaviors from the subReddit; that even though we are not privy to member’s actual names, the acceptance, cohesiveness, and praise impact and reinforce a digital arena where fans can express appropriate sentiment and grief in a safe and welcoming space.

Fan Supportive Communication in Fictionalized Loss on *Talking Dead*

“You don’t get used to saying goodbye especially on this show. You get attached to these characters. You welcome them into your home every week and they become part of your ritual. And it is very hard to see them go. So, take a deep breath as we bid a final farewell to all of those that we lost tonight”. So began Hardwick’s introduction for the In Memoriam section on *Talking Dead*. Characters have come and gone, yet for some fans and even the actors themselves (along with their costars) it may prove difficult to process and accept that they are no longer part of the show. *The Walking Dead* fans employ pathos-laden rhetorical narratives and offer supportive forms of communication when grieving and remembering their beloved characters. This section will focus on two characters in particular: T-Dog and Hershel.

T-Dog’s brief three-season run on *The Walking Dead* still, for some fans, is a wound too sore, despite his on-air death occurring over three seasons ago. The potential for character growth in T-Dog both angered and plagued fans with questions on what could have been. In a retrospective post regarding the popularity and attachment that *The Walking Dead* fans had for T-Dog, fans took it upon themselves to justify why the death impacted them so much:

Jax1492: T-Dog was part of the original cast and people grew attached to him, and then he died like a hero (2012)

Uhdylan: I feel like most people wished that he lived longer and became a bigger role in the show instead of having a death overshadowed by Lori’s. It was almost pointless and we lost a character that everyone wanted to see become something more. (2012)

Atfsix: Exactly, people liked him because he was with us for so long – and we would have been way more accepting of him getting some character development (2012)

In the abovementioned exchange, two themes emerge surrounding the fan discourse of T-Dog's death: 1) The heroic persona of T-Dog's character and 2) Unlike what Uhdylan indicated, despite having another original cast member die in the same episode (Lori – the main protagonist's wife), an overwhelming amount of messages revolved around identifying and grieving over T-Dog instead. Even on that night's episode of *Talking Dead*, the in-studio guest was the actor who played T-Dog rather than the actress who portrayed Lori. I would argue that these themes of identification, along with elevating T-Dog's heroic persona, far exceeded mere anecdotal examples and instead positions the fan's rhetorical narratives in a way that highlights the role of supportive communication.

At the onset of *Talking Dead* (S02E04), Hardwick's opening monologue reiterated the somber tone that fans discussed on social media:

Tonight's episode was rough; I'm not going to lie. I do not feel good. We're going to get through this together you guys. I'm honored to have our special surprise guest T-Dog himself, IronE Singleton, here tonight ... Tonight's episode was emotionally excruciating... We lost T-Dog we lost Lori. Their grueling journey of survival came to a violent end in both cases: both were horrific ways to die.

After the guests were introduced, Hardwick mentioned that *The Walking Dead* producer Gale Anne Hurd saw that #Tdog and #notTdog were both trending on Twitter during the evening's episode of *The Walking Dead*. Though historical data assessing an approximate number of tweets is not currently available, it requires a significant number of individual tweets to push the topic into the space of a trending hashtag. After hearing Hardwick state this, IronE addressed the audience and his fans of the show saying: "I am so touched by the outpouring of love that I have received from the fans and I just wanted to say thanks and that I love you from the bottom of my

heart”. IronE’s pathos-laden statement, while certainly emotional, spoke on behalf of T-Dog’s idealistic characteristics that fans supported and cheered for.

R.I.P. T-Dog: A Selfless Character and True Hero for the Fans

Executive Producer Gale Anne Hurd characterized IronE’s real-life personality as mirroring that of his on-screen fictional self: “I think IronE was the most spiritual positive influence that we’ve had on set since the very beginning. I never saw [him] without a smile on [his] face and a warm and happy word for everybody on set”. T-Dog’s actions within the fictionalized universe of *The Walking Dead*, along with IronE’s public persona seem to converge into representing, for the fans, the epitome of class, selflessness, and heroism in the following:

T-Dog was arguably the most helpful member of the group...Everything he did was helpful or supportive. He was there when people needed help; he was always willing to lend a hand. That is why there’s so much T-Dog love. Not to mention having met IronE Singleton in person, he’s an awesome guy with a good heart (Thegroovyturtle, 2013)

Clearly, fans used the heroic and selfless persona of T-Dog as a rallying cry for support on Reddit during the live-episode commentary. Other Redditors contributed their own snapshot of grief at T-Dog’s death: “T-Dog...Rick breaking down...too much. I cried too much. Man, that scene killed me. Like, I’ve heard the cry of death like that before and that made me tear up a bit. That scene was rough. Props to him though, he’s an amazing actor” (PoeticalArt, 2012). Forums on Reddit offer niche fans a public outlet to express emotional attachment freely in a community of like-minded individuals. Hardwick, during *Talking Dead* read a sampling of Tweets expressing the fan sentiment about T-Dog’s death:

Hardwick: You know, let’s do some T-Dog tweets. These are from across Twitter: ‘Why T-Dog why’, Another one is ‘RIP T-Dog, my homey still’, ‘T-Dog was my favorite

character’, ‘ I AM CRYING in all caps’, ‘T-Dog has my total respect’, “T-Dog is going out like a warrior’, ‘RIP T-Dog’, ‘Man, T-Dog went out like a true champ, a very bad ass way to go’. The fans love you man, they love you.

IronE: I love the fans, and I really appreciate the executives, Gale and the entire crew for really giving T-Dog a heroic ending. I’m so thankful for that.

T-Dog, as an everyman character, drew in support from a variety of Redditors. These posts highlight and elevate his personality traits in such a way that frame an almost saintly image of his past on-screen performances. Interpersonal communication scholars describe perception and impression through the use of Gestalts (see Asch, 1946), or mental frameworks which reinforce positive or negative viewpoints. For T-Dog, the fan narratives highlight what is known as the halo effect or “the tendency to positively interpret what someone says or does because we have a positive Gestalt of them” (McCornack, 2016, p. 88). Despite T-Dog’s limited on-screen presence over the three seasons on *The Walking Dead*, fans on Reddit gauged and judged those times he was in front of the camera as consistently reaffirming his already heroic persona. For example, consider the following pathos-laden justifications offered by fans in the forum titled: “Why People Like T-Dog So Much?”

People like T-Dog because he is the underdog of the show. He didn’t get involved much, but he was always helpful. He was the equivalent of the Hulk in the *Avengers* film. Everyone likes him because he is the relaxed survivor of the group. Think about it, he never had a time where people didn’t like him. Every other character up to this point had had a moment where people dislike that character. T-Dog’s actions were always something people liked. That’s why people like T-Dog, he’s the underdog who never did anything wrong (Clickclackpaddywack, 2013).

I think a lot of reasons people liked T-Dog so much was the way he died. He went out like a hero and everyone likes a hero. He was also one of the originals, so people liked him from the start and grew accustomed to [seeing] him every week (Bravesfan429, 2013).

He was a character with nowhere near enough screen time as he deserved. He pretty much saved the entire group...and this is why I loved T-Dog and wished he got more screen time (User deleted, 2013).

These forums became not only nostalgic for fans remembering their favorite scene featuring T-Dog, but the mere mention of his name elicited acknowledgements from other fans, as a shout-out to the character. One word statements like “TDOG4LYFE” (Thesickness89, 2013) or short epitaphs like “T-Dog: The moment he starts to develop as a character, they kill him off for shock value. R.I.P. my sweet prince” (Studbeastank, 2014) provide some indication that the fictional loss of a character can not only be devastating, but can serve as a topic to help unite this mediated fan community through the stages of grief and remembrance.

IronE’s swan song appearance on *Talking Dead* encapsulated the sadness felt by fans, but also, via Reddit, furthered the sober sentiments of saying goodbye to the deceased character – as one fan lamented “IronE keeps tearing up during *Talking Dead*: this is breaking my heart” (Batmanismymuse, 2012). Hardwick facilitated the love for T-Dog not only by calling out the subReddit fans’ attachment and support for their character, but also providing IronE the opportunity to respond and give thanks to his fans for their endearing support in the following:

Hardwick: We are so sad to see you go. But you were exceptional and I want you to know what a fan favorite you were. If you ever go to *The Walking Dead* subreddit, people

were always like “We want more T-Dog...we love T-Dog” and now we had to say goodbye to you tonight. What are you feeling?

IronE: I am so touched by the outpouring of love that I have received from the fans. I just want to say thank you and I love you from the bottom of my heart. It [the support] came out of nowhere. It was like, you know, all of a sudden, fans were like...Where is T-Dog? He doesn't speak and he doesn't say anything, and they [the fans] were like ‘we want more T-Dog’ and then it just swelled up and the fan response got huge. It was amazing and I just want to thank everybody for that.

The somber tone of the episode continued into the “In Memoriam” segment where Hardwick and viewers pay their respect to those characters that died on that night’s episode of *The Walking Dead*. In past and future episodes, Hardwick keeps this segment light and oftentimes labels the zombie deaths with humorous descriptions; however, this was not the case during this particular episode. In his introduction to the segment Hardwick stated “It is time to say goodbye to those we lost tonight. A lot of really, I know, this one ...I don’t have a snarky comment for this, I’m genuinely sad, so let’s watch In Memoriam”. After the montage ended the words “No One Is Safe” appeared on the screen, reiterating the sentiment offered by *The Walking Dead* creator Robert Kirkman as previously mentioned. *Talking Dead* and the Reddit forums function as pieces of epideictic rhetoric to serve as officially recognized spaces where individuals praise and offer their condolences towards actors who have appeared on the show. Likewise, the actors themselves conform to the expectations and decorum of the show, facilitated by Chris Hardwick, to reciprocate the gratitude they felt from their fans and costars who experienced and processed their grief stemming from this fictionalized loss.

R.I.P. Hershel – *The Walking Dead*'s Moral Compass

If IronE represented the selfless and heroic character, then Hershel (portrayed by Scott Wilson) was the moral compass of the group of survivors. His fatherly persona and calm demeanor made his death particularly impactful for the online fans, and especially visible for his costar Lauren Cohan who appeared alongside him on the *Talking Dead* episode. As one Redditor commented: “So if tonight’s emotions haven’t gotten to you yet, watch as Lauren Cohan, through tears, laments losing her TV dad and real life mentor, Scott Wilson, who looks like an absolute sweetheart leaving a show he seems to really appreciate” (Clipguy, 2013). Chris Hardwick’s appearance on *Talking Dead* was much more restrained and somber in terms of his normally energetic personality than during the episode saying goodbye to T-Dog. Scott’s co-star Lauren Cohan (who portrayed his fictional daughter, Maggie) was visibly saddened and stated at the onset of the episode:

Cohan: I just feel so horrible; I can’t even talk about it. It’s just really sad. Your logical self wants to think about it [Hershel’s death] as having a greater purpose to the whole story but basically you’re just losing a friend really. And so it’s been...I don’t know? I almost didn’t want to do this *Talking Dead*. I’m actually so sad right now. I’m sorry.

Hardwick: No that’s okay. I mean I think a lot of people are feeling the same thing. Because with Hershel, it’s sort of like, we keep losing the moral center of the show. Before we had Hershel we had Dale and it was very hard to see Dale go. And then we got you, and you became the ‘dad’ of the group and you counseled Rick through a lot of stuff that he was going through and yet you maintained. You kept things strong.

Moreover, similar sentiments were echoed by fans who felt that the character of Hershel brought a sense of stability and normalcy to an already uncertain world. As one fan wrote via the

subReddit “Hershel was the voice of reason and the most level headed person of the group. Without him, the group doesn’t seem as well-rounded and prepared” (Yanroque, 2014). Clearly, the supportive and reflective comments toward Scott Wilson, provided by the fans and actors/producers on *The Walking Dead*, reinforced the prevalence of pathos-centered rhetorical appeals.

The burden of loss expressed by the actors appearing on *Talking Dead* resonated with those on the subReddit who took to the forums to express their sadness and offer their thoughts on how the character, Hershel, impacted their lives. For some fans, the death was so shocking that despite being a fictional loss, they were “still not over it” (Erikasue, 2014, Hbastion 2015). Other fans communicated their real life grief after experiencing that episode: “Hershel was like a beloved grandpa and the way he died was such a shock that I was literally shell-shocked for like a day after the original episode. I’m just totally stunned and saddened. I cried actual tears and I still cannot watch that episode without feeling gutted” (Loldemort7, 2015). Given his violent on-screen death, contrasted with the heroic death of T-Dog, most fan reactions reiterated the instability and violent nature of *The Walking Dead*.

Fan narratives identified with Hershel’s headstrong behavior and ability to remain centered despite the on-screen drama occurring each episode. Given Hershel’s likeability with the fans, they identified the violent death as “the most heartbreaking way he could have possibly gone. Were he to have succumbed to the illness, were one of the other survivors to have turned and gotten him, that is one thing...but any of the characters, let alone Hershel, to have been slaughtered like that, it was heartbreaking” (Krantzer, 2013).

Lauren Cohan, during the broadcast of *Talking Dead*, best exemplifies the emotions and attachment that fans have toward the characters on *The Walking Dead*. While many of the fans

online discussed the fatherly characteristics of Hershel, Lauren's perspective as an actor on the series lent her not only a degree of authenticity of first-hand experience while filming, but provided a moment where her emotions surfaced and became part of the tribute for her costar. While Cohan's public grief similarly reflected those comments from fans communicating the loss of Hershel online, her interactions expressed on *Talking Dead* reaffirmed just how connected the fans are to the source material and characters (via social media), while also affording her a space designated to collectively process her loss. Consider the following excerpt from Cohan, presented in full, describing not only the technical elements surrounding Scott's final on-screen appearance, but also the power of identification that she expressed regarding viewing his role as both a mentor and father-figure:

Hardwick: Your reaction (nodding to Cohan) was pretty raw and emotional. How did you guys shoot that scene?

Cohan: That's one of the few times during the show that we've done only two takes of something and we didn't actually use the second take. It was so emotional. I mean you see in the episode that Scott is all the way down at the bottom of the yard but when we did the take Scott came and stood on the other side of the fence near me and Emily Kinney (actor who portrays Maggie's sister, Beth). So much of the show is just completely about being there, and this was the best example of no acting required. It was just crazy. He was on the other side of the fence from us and just being there. God I'm going to get so Maggie and start crying in a second, it's so ridiculous. But what was interesting as well about this scene was that the other characters were behind us and we all hadn't worked together that much and we bonded so much in that moment because it wasn't a matter of having face-to-face dialogue, it was like we were all so viscerally

experiencing this loss, and after that, we were all ready to go on what adventures that are in store for the second half of the season. It was hard, you know? It was good to have Scott so close in that moment and it's just hard. He's been such a mentor to me; I actually can't believe I'm being so emotional. And you know what is so crazy is that when we shot the internment episode, my dad has actually never been on the set before, and he came to visit the set. It was so random because he was coming on and I didn't know what scene was going to be that day and it ended up being the scene where Scott is getting ready to go inside to deliver his speech 'You risk your life you just choose who you're risking your life for' and my dad has always been so intent on saying to me that when you find a mentor, hold onto them, and you never know when they're going to reach you or find you in your life. And that was so magical that he got to be there on that day. I'm just so sad right now.

Hardwick: It's okay. This is one of those moments where we want to celebrate you but we're also sad to see you go. We're really sad to see you go. I know a lot of people online are freaking out now.

This excerpt sheds light on witnessing an actor step out of her role from the show and become emotionally invested and expressive in another character on *The Walking Dead*, something we have seen transpire frequently in the Reddit forums. Granted, Cohan's personal relationship with Scott is established from her quote, but these sentiments help personalize and humanize an actor's emotional stance on these fictional deaths – leveling out and highlighting the appropriate channels for fans to grieve and offer supportive feedback for one another.

Real-Life Death and Grief – Fans’ Supportive Communication as Cathartic Release

One of Hardwick’s roles on *Talking Dead* is to serve as a moderator and facilitator of supportive communication for those viewers watching that night’s episode. Hardwick elaborated on his quasi therapeutic role for fans processing the fictional loss/death of a character: “These are the episodes that I get nervous about my job because I know I am essentially counseling people when they come in and are shaken up by things like this. These are the episodes that I dread doing by saying ‘hey guys everything’s going to be okay. It’s a TV show, the character is still alive and everything is fine’”. Hardwick’s role as a moderator and facilitator of social support shifted from offering condolences to his guests to opening up about his recent personal loss (*Talking Dead* S03E06). During the final minute of the live broadcast, Hardwick issued a personal statement to the camera that his father, Billy Hardwick, passed away unexpectedly the previous day. Somber in tone, Hardwick stated:

I just wanted to say something and I don’t want things to get weird. My dad passed away suddenly yesterday and it was kind of weird. I didn’t know if I was going to come into work, but I like this job and it was a nice distraction. I just want to thank everyone online, it was one of the times that the internet was like ‘Ah’; it was really nice. Really quickly though, the day before he died, I had a really nice chat with him and I was really lucky that I got to tell him how much I loved him. Look, the holidays are coming up, and I know they can be a pain in the ass, but I just want to say that your family is important and you should appreciate and take time to appreciate in the midst of all the travelling and all the crap that happens. Families can be weird, but just remember that they’re important and that they love you and you should take some time to appreciate them. I just want to say RIP Billy Hardwick. I love you dad. Thanks for watching, and good night.

Hardwick's personal tribute expressed the all-too-real sentiment of mortality for those who have faced a personal loss. As we have seen in this dissertation, *Talking Dead* discusses all aspects of fandom – including the intersections of fandom and technology – but what happens when an unexpected death in real-life intersects with a televised show geared towards helping fans to come to terms with their beloved characters they have recently “lost”? Hardwick's monologue at the end of the episode captured a particular moment of real-life grief and mourning and was immediately picked up by fans on the subReddit forums. Fans began writing, offering their condolences and supportive feedback to pay their respects to Hardwick and his family by honoring and commemorating the memory of his father. The online *Talking Dead* subReddit forums, however, morphed into a collective of individuals sharing their own personal losses and became an arena where this mediated and disembodied community of fans provided various types of supportive communication for one another.

The subReddit transformed from a place where commenters paid their respects to the Hardwick family to a supportive environment in which contributors disclosed their own personal stories of loss, sharing how they came to terms with death and grief. Gone was the pretense of dissecting the minutia of the zombie series, which instead was replaced with testimonials and narratives that were very much epideictic in nature. Hardwick's initial comment on the subReddit forum produced approximately 80 pages worth of stories, testimonials, and reflections of grief, which provided a real-life parallel to the fictionalized grieving experienced by fans who identified with the deceased characters on *The Walking Dead*. Fans participated in the cathartic release of emotion by strengthening the community ties of their fandom centered on the common bonds of humanity – in essence, collectively grieving and honoring the death of a family member.

Hardwick Addresses the Fans on Reddit

Chris Hardwick addressed his fans on Reddit with a 2-page response to everything that had occurred since his father's passing. Included here is an excerpted version of his response, which set the tone for the comments that followed:

I can't tell you how much it means to me that so many people have expressed their condolences and support. It's been a weird few days. I've experienced death in my life, but when it's a parent...it's the most unnatural-feeling natural thing, if that makes any sense. I have a pretty healthy outlook on it. I'm sad, and I think that's good. My dad deserves me to be sad. I don't particularly enjoy getting blindsided by it – one minute I feel like 'Hey! I'm going to be ok' and then the next minute "Hey! Crying!" I maintain that we were lucky. It could have been worse. My dad wasn't remotely ill nor was it a horribly painful accident. Saturday morning he said his chest hurt, he passed out and that was pretty much it...Sorry for rambling. Sorry if it seems too heavy and doomy. I'm really ok most of the time. I dig the shit out of the Reddit community for all its sharing, caring and...When I saw this on the front page, I just started typing and couldn't stop. I'll get through this (as people do) and I know I'll be stronger as a result. I have a terrific family and a spectacular girlfriend who has been taking great care of me. Again, thank you for all your nice words. Pretty much everyone has experienced this to one degree or another and your warmth and wisdom are comforting. You're excellent humans and I hope you all have wonderful holidays. Hugs (ChrisHardwick, 2013)

Hardwick's letter prompted fans to provide supportive comments and condolences for his family's loss. Hardwick, as a self-proclaimed Redditor, interacted directly with his fans on Reddit, sharing meaning and communicating empathetic support across the online community.

As we have seen in previous chapters, the Reddit forums operate as a collective of individual users commenting on a wide variety of topics. Given the seriousness of posts on Hardwick's father's passing, the Redditors coalesced around the topic of death and grief and began to offer weak tie social support. As Wright and Rains (2013) described, the "characteristics of computer-mediated support group members increase the potential that support seekers will receive objective feedback and novel information as well as empathy and understanding" (p. 312). While not a designed mediated support group, the opportune moment of Hardwick's disclosure coupled with the amount of individualized and personalized stories transformed this space, in particular this specific forum topic, to an appropriate venue to offer and receive support. Some Redditors latched on to the fact that Hardwick himself identified as a Reddit user in the following:

I am sort of po'd that /r/walkingdead didn't have this [news] up there immediately after the broadcast [of *Talking Dead*]. Reddit would not be the same without you Chris. I love knowing you are out there reading Reddit like the rest of us. Your dad seemed like an amazing guy and I will totally take your words to heart this Thanksgiving. My dad passed away 3 years ago and I still email his Gmail account every now and then... Your fans support you though this roughest of moments (Toxictoy, 2013).

Clearly, the Reddit forum operates as a venue for fans like Toxictoy to employ a generalized statement of support for Hardwick's family while offering a blanket acknowledgement of appraisal support that those on Reddit owe a lot to him and appreciate his past contributions.

Other Redditors attempted to relate their own personal stories to Chris' dad through their supportive comments. These types of interactions included sharing a poem to Chris from poet Mary Elizabeth Frye, as source of inspiration for Hardwick. Hardwick responded to that

particular user saying that the poem was amazing, and that he “may actually read it at his [father’s] service” (ChrisHardwick, 2013). Even for those who did not know his father personally, the supportive feedback offered affirmation for Hardwick and condolences toward his family: “Thanks for all you do man. Your work is most appreciated, and your dedication to your fans is also commendable and I offer my sincere condolences as do the rest of your fans I’m sure” (Waitwherearemypants, 2013).

One particular exchange between Hardwick and a Redditor served as a catalyst for fans to begin offering their own personal stories of loss, which prompted the forum to transform into a quasi-mediated social support group (2013):

Jcraw0222: A few weeks ago I lost one of my best friends to a car accident and it is still not real that he is gone. He was seriously as close as my own brother. I think of all the random crap that we used to do together and I want to call him and talk about it. But it’s just not an option anymore. When my friends and I hang out it just feels like something is missing, because obviously there is. There is nothing like losing a family member. I feel so much for you and the rest of your family. I’m so glad you got to have such great memories and recent reconciliation with your family. It means so much to have great family and friends around you. Much love Chris. Hugs.

ChrisHardwick: It’s so interesting how the brain tries to make sense of a sudden loss. For example, on Saturday I had the impulse to call my dad to talk about this horrible thing that happened, and then I had to remind myself that he was the thing. Sorry you have to go through this. Losing my dad in his 70s fucking sucks but losing a friend to a car accident must feel so unjust...I wish you the best! You’re not alone. Strange that death is one of the things that can bind us all together.

Hardwick continued responding to the individual messages and started by affirming the Reddit community when he said “Look, I have enough wits about me to see the value of some sweet Reddit gold!” Despite Hardwick not replying to each message (in fact, after about 10 pages of comments, Hardwick drops off responding completely in the forum), fans continued displaying empathy toward one another in a safe space where they could process and describe their personal connection to death and loss. In the next section, I continue with examples of supportive communication, focusing specifically on how the community of fans within the subReddit forum used this mediated space to enact and perform emotional support by sharing their own stories of loss and offering sympathy toward one another.

Emotional Support from Fans to Fans

In Hardwick’s final post to the forum, he acknowledged how his initial comment for his dad reached so many people: “What I never had anticipated was that the episode would affect so many people and the comments section blew up with stories of people reconnecting with their families or reflecting on memories they had” (ChrisHardwick, 2013). It is true, fans posting to the Reddit forum offered their condolences to Hardwick’s family and continued to share their own family stories or desires to reconnect and rebuild those relationships. Once Hardwick was no longer a visible presence in the forum, fans began providing empathetic support by offering advice and sharing their own similar narratives. Scholars like Wright and Rains (2013) suggested that “weak ties may represent a less risky outlet for disclosure with fewer obligations and a more objective perspective of one’s circumstances” (p. 319). One post summed up the tone of the entire forum: “This whole thread has brought me comfort in knowing that there are so many people out there going through what I am going through: none of us are alone” (Little-evo, 2013). With a greater degree of sharing, the Reddit forum became a space where fans could feel

safe in sharing their own loss without fear of judgment or any obligation of having to communicate with others face-to-face. The anonymity of screen names may have contributed to the level of trust and willingness to share personal stories of grief and death.

Hardwick's announcement of his father's passing led to quite a few posts discussing Redditors' loss of their own fathers, sharing intimate details with the Reddit community. Redditors began using this particular forum as a space of mediated social support and, since such disclosure became the norm in terms of content, users abided by this space and refrained from posting unrelated posts about the television show *The Walking Dead* or other spam-related comments.

Mediated social support, like that found on this Reddit forum, conforms to the goals of online support established by Communication scholars: "they are based on principles of empowerment, inclusion, nonhierarchical decision making and shared responsibility" (Braithwaite et al., 1999, p. 125). These users were able to offer emotional support ranging from providing encouraging feedback, to their personal stories, to stressing empathy by highlighting similar experiences. Consider the following messages and their use of emotional support (2013):

Itatton: I unexpectedly lost my dad 2 years and 3 days ago and I am still grieving too. I'm not sure what your relationship with your dad was like or what the circumstances were when he passed, but we as sons and daughters both tell and show our parents we love them countless times through our lives. While you're still grieving I hope you can find comfort in the memories of those cherished times you spent together and remember how happy you both were and how much he loved you and felt loved by you.

Theeavenger: My dad was in the ICU for a month, and when it came down to not being able to recover we brought him home under hospice care. Watching your role model

deteriorate right before your eyes has got to be the hardest thing I will ever go through emotionally in my life. However, I was able to spend my time with him and let him know how much I loved him. Some don't get that opportunity, and for that I'm most grateful.

Hermedic18: You are very lucky, my dad was an alcoholic my entire childhood...I wish I had that father son relationship...and I hope you appreciate that at least in your past you were able to experience.

Hiphoppington: My father too was an alcoholic but he was never abusive. In fact, I never even recognized that he was until I was much older and he talked to me about it. He dealt with his problems the only way he knew how but he would never let it affect me. I'll never take for granted the wonderful times I had with him.

Posts such as this, often in the form of several paragraphs addressing the parent-child relationship, peppered the forum. Interestingly, as each story was told, the posts were never judgmental in tone and usually indicated some type of gratitude for the time that the contributor was able to spend with their parent.

Others sought to use the forums as a way to offer their own recommendations for how to deal with processing grief. Examples of supportive communication ranged from offering advice to parents: "Just stay strong and be there for your kids. They're going to look up to you and you should make as many wonderful memories with them as possible. Your dad would be happy and proud of you I know it" (Katfish, 2013), to just encouraging individuals that they are not alone, and to sharing their experience with others: "Be sure to talk it out with people, it makes that transition hurt a lot less" (HueyBosco, 2013). To summarize, the comfort expressed by the

Redditors' encouragement also acted as a cathartic release to tell their personal stories to anonymous strangers.

As we can see, Reddit includes multiple forums for individuals to engage on a wide variety of topics. While there are entire subReddits dedicated to coping with death and loss (e.g., Death: Let's Talk About It, Grief Support: Learning to Live Without, and Lost a Loved One), what we have seen in this chapter is that individuals coming together around a common fandom can provide supportive communication to other likeminded fans, not only about coming to terms with the loss of their favorite character, but also expressing real life emotional support. To be sure, my aim is not to compare the real-life grieving process to the fictionalized loss of the characters these fans feel so passionate about. However, both grieving and loss narratives are found within *The Walking Dead* fandom, and both narratives have at their origin a televised broadcast designed to help relieve and provide a sense of closure for these fans. Hardwick's impromptu tribute to his father further united the subReddit community by providing an additional outlet to express these pathos-laden sentiments by seeking to provide empathy and emotional support.

Concluding Thoughts

Social support, as we have seen in Chapter 5, is linked to fandom and the *Talking Dead* community. Much of the research and scholarship on social support has created typologies describing the type of support that various fan communities provide (e.g., the subReddit forums and the *Talking Dead* broadcast specifically). One of the typologies of social support that pervades these various agents of change in *The Walking Dead* fandom is emotional support. Shows like *Talking Dead* would not exist if it were not for people like Chris Hardwick, through AMC, recognizing a growing and active body of fans willing to discuss, critique, and analyze all

aspects related to a popular scripted zombie television series. Part of that recognition that is enacted through Hardwick, and echoed via the message board forums, is to provide a space designed for fans to work through and process together their experiences of watching a highly dramatic series. Emotional support, as defined by Braithwaite et al. (1999), includes statements centering on empathy by “stressing the similarity of one person’s experiences with another’s” (p. 136). Hardwick’s use of the shared “we” pronoun at the onset of many episodes of *Talking Dead* suggest the promise and potential that can result by publicly sharing a space of loss and possible growth in reaffirming sentiments such as “We’ll get through this together”. Researchers (Aron et al., 1992; Fiedler et al., 1991; Seider et al., 2009; Sillars et al., 1997) have studied how the use of the pronoun “we” aids in creating solidarity amongst individuals across various dimensions of social support. Hardwick’s hosting persona is mindful of including all types of fans as viewers of the broadcast in order to illustrate the shared and community-oriented nature of the *Talking Dead* fans.

The subReddit forums also provide network support to the members in that they already have a built-in community of people larger than those real life social networks. Network support involves “messages that appear to broaden the recipient’s social network, by connecting him or her to others with similar interests or situations” (Braithwaite, p. 135). *The Walking Dead* subReddit forums are specifically tailored toward the fans of the zombie series, so the barrier to enter and communicate with other members is low. Individual posts, as we have previously seen, share, affirm, and express a sense of support for those fictional characters and the impact they have on the fan’s real life. We also saw the subReddit forums turn into a mediated supportive environment focused on empowerment, and the catharsis felt at various stages in the grieving process. Likeminded fans, on these forums, largely put away their tangential comments and

directed their attention to actively engage in supportive communication for their fellow Redditors. These fans offered consoling and reaffirming messages toward the anonymous users as they collaboratively worked through and processed their own narratives of loss and grief.

The concept of fandom is a fluid term encompassing many different facets for those researching this concept, commenting on it, or personally identifying as a fan. At the base level, fandom involves dedicating some aspect of one's life toward some cultural object and injecting that object with meaning. The degree that one does this varies from person to person, of course, but these diverse and specialized communities centered on fandom is something that should not be ignored, especially from a Communication and Rhetorical Studies perspective. Fandom, over the last 40 years, has shifted from something one does (e.g., I am a fan of the Wisconsin Badgers) into something that one is. The concept of fandom can be an essential component of one's identity, and with the advent and widespread usage of social media, one has multiple opportunities to simultaneously express and engage with their specific and multiple fandoms.

Our fan narratives that we use to express commitment to, or interest in, a particular object are largely rhetorical in nature. The choices we make and how we choose to identify with these objects varies from the occasional (e.g., being a fair-weather fan of a sports team with a winning record) to the obsessive (e.g., actively maintaining a few blogs about the television show *Game of Thrones*, while live-tweeting actors/producers of the series, cosplaying at Comic-Con in San Diego, and reading/consuming all the ancillary materials related to the popular science fiction series). These are narratives that we enter into and end up performing in ways that make sense to us.

As we have seen in this dissertation, not all *The Walking Dead* fans will watch *Talking Dead*, and for those that do, not all will actively post on Reddit or directly ask actors questions

via Twitter. But shows like *Talking Dead* are reframing the entertainment potential by highlighting publicly the role that discourse and deliberation can play on primetime television. By choosing one particular fandom for this dissertation, the *Talking Dead* fans, I highlighted various rhetorical theories in the construction and maintenance of a certain type of fan identity.

In Chapter 1, I began by stating how recent innovations in social media have begun to open up new possibilities for individuals to express their fandom. With the aid of communication technology, fans now have the opportunity to gain a consistent and closer access to their particular object of fandom (e.g., actors, athletes, authors). By situating my dissertation on *The Walking Dead* fandom and its various manifestations, I highlighted how the various affordances that social media bestowed to fans in the 21st century had opened up new rhetorical spaces for inquiry, including the ways in which fans participate and the various means of that participation. *Talking Dead*, as my rhetorical artifact, provided such an entry point to how fandom operates within our social media landscape, and provided this study with multiple points of access: media reports on the popularity and newness of the show, official press releases and rhetoric produced on *Talking Dead*, and finally the fan narratives both on, and surrounding, *Talking Dead*, culled from the forums on *The Walking Dead* subReddit. This confluence of messages intermingling electronically helped direct the various strategies that fans employed to perform and portray their level of engagement.

Chapter 2 provided the various rhetorical and theoretical perspectives carried out in this dissertation, namely that of constitutive rhetoric along with theories of decorum as well as the disciplinary function of rhetorical discourse. In Chapter 2, and throughout the dissertation, I argued that *Talking Dead* rhetorically constitutes a specific type of fan identity, by making certain rhetorical options available to those who wish to participate according to the show's

guidelines. Additionally, I argued that fans themselves constitute their fandom by engaging in a wide variety of discussions to reaffirm themselves as a serious fan across various social media forums.

According to the theory of constitutive rhetoric, the focus is more of an ideological type of criticism, and my dissertation of *Talking Dead* extends and continues the theory of constitutive rhetoric by examining and analyzing the fan discourse produced through social media. The theory of constitutive rhetoric stated that an individual is called into a certain and specific type of ideology, whereby through their participation, they are creating, sustaining, and ultimately embodying the narrative discourse. Concurrent to, but found throughout, my dissertation on *The Walking Dead* fandom, was a strong undercurrent of theories centering on decorum, or appropriateness, along with the formation and enactment of disciplinary forms of rhetoric. Decorum can be mostly applied to fan studies in the level of power that an individual or organization has regarding the knowledge of specific plot points surrounding a film or television series. The power to spoil an episode can be a commodity that certain fans want to explore or avoid at all costs. The rules and theories of decorum suggest that abiding by these can vary from situation to situation. The interpretive act of maintaining decorum must be agreed upon and established by either the creative powers-that-be in the networks (e.g., AMC or Reddit moderators) or the individuals posting and carrying on interactions via the online discussion forums and message boards. Likewise, disciplinary forms of rhetoric are powerful because they are often so ubiquitous in our society that we follow them without paying any second-thoughts. The disciplinary rules and functions established by AMC's *Talking Dead* and enforced through the subReddit forums helps ideally maintain and control not only appropriate levels of content,

but also who can participate, and in what capacity they have to influence, or alter, the larger discussion(s).

In Chapter 3, it was fans themselves, via their own rhetorical narratives that were gathered and analyzed to cultivate the characteristics of those engaged and idealistic fans. The chapter focused on two particular episodes that served as exemplar case studies, whereby celebrity-guests-as-fans more closely approximated the avid and engaged users found on the subReddit forums. In Chapter 4, this fan community collectively came together to point out and distance themselves from those fans that were not perceived as having met the guidelines or criteria deemed appropriate. Through two negative case studies, I analyzed how both the official channel of production (AMC) along with the everyday vernacular voices of the online fan attempted to control, enforce, and discipline such inappropriate behaviors.

Only time will tell whether the genre of live after-shows will flourish given the successful viewing broadcast of *Talking Dead*; or if this is merely a sign of the technological times, and simply a flashpoint on the continuum of fan studies. This idea then brings up directions for future research surrounding fan cultures and technological advances in communication. Given our current political state, the power and use (or misuse) of social media and the actions of our speech, as ephemeral as it may be, have real life consequences. Consider for example, in May 2017 when President Trump tweeted the following: “Despite the constant negative press covfefe”. This one word, likely mistyped, caused an immediate response to a bewildered nation. *The New York Times* reported that timing was essential for those awake and active on Twitter when Trump sent that particular tweet, thereby creating an opportunity for political experts, pundits, and the everyday person to feel a part of some club or gathering at the ground level. Consider the following:

Yet the instinct to linger was powerful, for those who had glimpsed the initial post, even if they did not seem entirely sure why they were still awake. ‘Covfefe,’ said Tasneem Raja, a journalist, perhaps chafing at the growing communal giddiness. ‘There, I participated.’ Eventually, the jokes lurched into delirium. Twitter users held forth on the former F.B.I. director James Covfefe. They pledged to order grande covfefe during their next Starbucks runs...Consensus proved elusive – to say nothing of pronunciation guidelines – and the White House appeared disinclined to help. ‘The president and a small group of people know exactly what he meant,’ Sean Spicer, the press secretary, said flatly. He did not elaborate (Flegenheimer, 2017).

The ability for a large group of people to come together around a mysterious tweet from our Commander-in-Chief continues to baffle me. The Covfefe Twitter example is intriguing for the rhetorical power and potential that was created and produced by the media in the aftermath of the incident.

Directions for future research should continue to explore the relationship between social media and fan cultures. Since the beginning of this project, other live after-shows of popular scripted television shows have been broadcast including *After the Thrones* (originally broadcast on HBO following episodes of *Game of Thrones*) and *Talk of Thrones* (for HBO’s *Game of Thrones* broadcast live on Twitter following new episodes), and *Beyond Stranger Things*, based on the popular Netflix science fiction series *Stranger Things*. AMC has even continued to work with Chris Hardwick and produce other “Talking” after-shows based on the network’s other scripted series such as *Preacher* and *Better Call Saul*, aptly named *Talking Saul* and *Talking Preacher*. These additional opportunities for continued fan engagement following the success and broadcast of *Talking Dead*, suggest a need to disseminate this genre of television across our

contemporary popular and public culture. Critically examinations of fan narratives are worthy of continued study because of the inherent vernacular voices represented by the fans. As Howard (2005) stated, drawing upon the rhetorical work of Gerald Hauser, vernacular rhetoric helps explain how “institutional publics are influenced by everyday discourse” (p. 176). Studying fan-based narratives and how they can work with, against, or in support of media producers can help explain issues related to power dynamics, but also providing a voice, or voices, in support of how one chooses to perform and identify as a fan. In his conclusion, Howard contends that vernacular rhetoric is useful for rhetorical studies because it can “better inform our understanding of human symbolic action in everyday contexts, both virtual and real-world” (p.185).

Social media, as a technological communication tool, can provide additional avenues of inquiry within communication and rhetorical studies. Directions for future research will delve into aspects of crowd funding campaigns and fan activism to inquire how fans are using communication technology to bring other likeminded fans together, and to investigate strategies used to rhetorically position their use of social media to enhance their presence and credibility in this mediated context. In addition to studying specific case studies and textual artifacts of engaged fan practices, I am also interested in more qualitative-based projects consisting of interviewing fans as well as those creative powers-that-be responsible for shows like *Talking Dead* and other fan-based discussion shows and websites. Speaking directly with both fans and media producers will provide a wealth of narratives and first-hand experiences geared towards how and why social media is advancing fan studies. Whatever technological changes cause us to shift our perception and conceptualization of what it means to study fan cultures, one thing will

remain constant: my unending love for, and appreciation of, my own fan practices, namely that of classic westerns, film noir, comic books, and art.

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- Adolphson, J. V. (2010, October). *Save my show: Fan culture and the rhetoric of fan petition campaigns*. Presented at the annual Midwest Popular Culture Association conference, Minneapolis, MN.
- Adolphson, J. V. (2010, May). *Holy rock and rollers: A fantasy theme analysis of American Evangelicalism in Christian heavy metal*. Presented at the 14th Rhetoric Society of America Biennial Conference, Minneapolis, MN.
- Adolphson, J. V. (2010, May). *The apocalyptic rhetoric of Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church*. Presented at the 14th Rhetoric Society of America Biennial Conference, Minneapolis, MN.
- Adolphson, J. V. (2010, April). *It's still rock and roll to me: Christian heavy metal and the problem of authenticity*. Presented at the National Popular Culture and American Culture Associations Annual Conference, St. Louis, MO.

Adolphson, J. V. (2009, November). *In Christ's persona: A rhetorical analysis of Christian heavy metal music*. Presented at the National Communication Association conference, Chicago, IL.

Adolphson, J. V. (2009, April). *Hegemony and the silenced identity of John Amaechi*. Presented at Central States Communication Association, St. Louis, MO.

Adolphson, J. V. (2008, October). *Editorial cartoons: More than just black and white*. Presented at the annual Midwest Popular Culture Association conference, Cincinnati, OH.

Thomas, J., and Adolphson, J.V. (2007, August). *Sex offenders, media, and the politics of fear*. Presented at the American Correctional Association conference, Kansas City, KS.

Teaching Experience

Gustavus Adolphus College – St. Peter, Minnesota, Department of Communication Studies
Visiting Lecturer, September 2017 – Current

Public Discourse

Fan Cultures

Gender, Identity and Popular Culture

North Central College – Naperville, Illinois, Department of Communication
Instructor, August 2016 – November 2016

Media & Society

Public Speaking

California State University – Fresno, Department of Communication
Lecturer, August 2013- December 2015

Business and Professional Speaking

Communication Criticism

Fundamentals of Public Communication

Persuasion

Rhetorical Theory

University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, Department of Communication

Graduate Teaching Assistant, August 2009 – May 2013

Adjunct Instructor, August 2016 – May 2017

Interpersonal Communication

Business and Professional Communication

Critical Methods of Communication

Public Speaking

Northern Illinois University, Department of Communication

Graduate Teaching Assistant, Fall 2008 – Spring 2009

Fundamentals of Oral Communication

Critical Interpretation of Film/Television

Kishwaukee Community College

Adjunct Instructor, Spring 2008

Introduction to Sociology

Honors & Awards

- Top Paper Award – Communication at the Future Division, *Artificial intelligence: The problem within discourse analysis* – National Communication Association 2012 Convention.

Professional Affiliations

- National Communication Association, October 2009 – 2015
- Western States Communication Association, 2014-2015
- Rhetoric Society of America, October 2009 – 2013
- National Popular Culture Association, 2008 – 2011
- Central States Communication Association, 2008 - 2009