Elena Bonomo

The Rumors are True!

Gossip Girl and the Cooptation of the Cult Fan

In September of 2007, when discussing Gossip Girl (2007–), the newest television show on the burgeoning network The CW, executive vice president for marketing and brand strategy Rick Haskins explained: “We’re starting to cross-pollinate different mediums. […] We’re trying to make all mediums work together.”1 In other words, the producers of Gossip Girl—like those of Dawson’s Creek (1998–2003), Lost (2004–), and Heroes (2006–), among others—have embraced convergence. They have created a transmedia story. One that, as in the words of Henry Jenkins, “unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.”2

The distinctive and valuable texts of Gossip Girl include: (1) a serial novel, conceptualized by the “book packager” 17th Street Productions (now called Alloy Entertainment) as a transmedia story and accredited to Cecily von Ziegesar; (2) the television show, aired on The CW television network, streamed on The CW website, and sold on iTunes; (3) additional web content, including (a) a fictional blog, penned in the voice of the show’s anonymous narrator Gossip Girl and featuring in-depth episode recaps, character background information, additional narratives, interactive maps, still photos, and space for viewer and user comments, (b) music downloads of songs featured on the show, (c) message boards, (d) links to “The Upper East Side,” the Gossip Girl Second Life property, (e) space for viewer/users to make their own blogs, and (f) additional streaming content, including video interviews with cast members and producers and “behind-the-scenes featurettes;” and (4) mobile content (specifically for users of Verizon Wireless), including downloadable ringtones, videos, character interviews, episode recaps, episode previews, character biographies, and wallpapers, as well as text message alerts from characters on the show.

Accordingly, the content of Gossip Girl flows across several media platforms—from serial novel, to television screen, to computer screen, to mobile device—and thus incorporates multiple media industries, while anticipating and demanding a more active media audience. Here, I will discuss how Gossip Girl not only appropriates fan practices once described as “cult” into the “mainstream,” but also distinguishes itself from other texts in this “age of media convergence” by embedding convergence culture into the narrative itself.

In his explanation of transmedia storytelling, Jenkins notes not only a shift in how stories are told but also a shift in the nature of the stories themselves: “More and more, storytelling has become the art of world building, as artists create compelling environments that cannot be fully explored or exhausted within a single work or even a single medium.”3 While Jenkins sees potential for both artists and audiences alike in “world building,” he also aligns such practices with how cult texts—including Star Trek, Star Wars, and Buffy the Vampire Slayer, among many others—work within a transmedia framework.
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others—have generated similar forms of audience engagement. Still, Jenkins claims that “the Web has made visible the hidden compromises that enabled participatory culture and commercial culture to coexist throughout much of the twentieth century.” As commercial culture addresses these specialized, participatory audiences, Matt Hills’ fears of media producers co-opting cult TV seem to have been realized.

Accordingly, Gossip Girl fits almost perfectly into the mold that Hills constructs of “how one would go about designing a cult show.” He begins: “A good start would be to use key production personnel who have worked in the past on shows included in fans’ ‘intertextual network’ of cult shows.” Appropriately, Gossip Girl executive producers Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage were made famous through their work on The O.C., another teen show certainly included in the ‘intertextual network’ of shows that blur the distinctions between “cult” and “mainstream.” Hills continues: “One might also cast a mixture of unknown actors/actresses as well as one or two that have appeared in previous cult shows.” Among the cast of Gossip Girl, Blake Lively (who plays Serena van der Woodsen) garnered initial fan appreciation through her role as Bridget in The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants (2005), another Alloy Entertainment transmedia success.

While Gossip Girl is not based on the typical “science-fiction/fantasy/horror” premise of shows like Buffy the Vampire Slayer or The X-Files, as Hills suggests, the world of Gossip Girl is still undeniably a fantasy. For most viewers, the lifestyle of these wealthy high school students—a life of extravagant parties, underage drinking, drug use, and casual sex—is completely foreign, but made “familiar to fans” through the ongoing narration of the character Gossip Girl and through audience identification with other characters outside of this community (characters who must also learn the lifestyle). While the narrative of Gossip Girl revolves around a “mystery or narrative puzzle that will never be answered”—who is Gossip Girl?—several characters (including Blair and Chuck and Lily and Rufus) are “narratively blocked from consummating their love or attraction.” As a manufactured cult text, Gossip Girl once again aligns itself with the show Dawson’s Creek and with what Hills, in another article, dubs as the “mainstream cult.”

In his definitive essay “Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching,” Jenkins describes “fandom” as “a vehicle for marginalized subcultural groups…to pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations” and as “a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests.” Yet, fans of these mainstream cults, including Gossip Girl, need not “pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations” because the dominant representations—the shows and their producers—have provided and thereby co-opted that space. In The CW-generated polls on the Gossip Girl message boards, fans not only have the opportunity
to voice their opinions, but those opinions can then be used by The CW for its commercial advantage. Thus, in this age of media convergence, catering to the “migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” is not without commercial imperatives. Convergence is the attempt to co-opt the cult fan and the cult text.

While Gossip Girl, as a transmedia, mainstream cult text, has precursors in other television shows like Dawson’s Creek, Lost, and Heroes, Gossip Girl distinguishes itself from these precursors by featuring notions of convergence as part of the narrative itself. More specifically, the narrator Gossip Girl and the other characters in the show use multiple media platforms to circulate narratives—or the gossip upon which the show is based—to their peers, “who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.” Though every episode features the characters using multiple media platforms to share and to learn about the most current gossip in the world of the show, the episode “All About My Brother” (season one, original air date: May 5, 2008) serves as a particularly appropriate case study of how Gossip Girl promotes convergence culture as crucial to the lives of teenagers, though uncontrollable by those who do not understand it.

At the start of the episode, Gossip Girl (Kristen Bell) announces, in voiceover as always, the outrageous rumors circulating about the dueling protagonists, Blair Waldorf (Leighton Meester) and Jenny Humphrey (Taylor Momsen). As Blair (known on the blogs as “The Queen B”) and Jenny (known as “Little J”), and their respective entourages, scale the steps outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gossip Girl resolves: “It looks like the battle between ‘The Queen B’ and ‘Little J’ has moved from the streets to the blogs…” In this world, mediated rumors are equally as destructive as face-to-face slander or physical abuse.

Meanwhile, Jenny’s interactions with her father Rufus Humphrey (Matthew Settle) show how transmedia stories, though pervasive, are difficult to control, especially for adults. Though Rufus acknowledges the importance of media, he still does not know how to harness their power. After Jenny lies about going to choir practice (when she is going to a party at her boyfriend Asher’s house), Rufus visits his friend and former lover Lily van der Woodsen (Kelly Rutherford) for a “mother’s advice.” Rufus explains his dilemma: “I tell [Jenny] she can’t see Asher; she calls him. I take away her phone; they are on iChat. How can you keep them from growing up when they can have a full relationship from the confines of their own bedrooms?” Lily responds: “The answer is you can’t. She’s going to grow up no matter what!” In this exchange, the adults not only blur the distinctions between virtual and “full,” or physical, relationships, but also acknowledge that the communicative properties of new media are unstoppable. The parents must simply trust that their children know how to use them appropriately.

Rufus then admits that raising his son Dan was “so much easier.” While Lily attributes this discrepancy in childrearing to the differences between boys and girls in general, perhaps raising Dan was easier for Rufus because Dan is professedly an outsider to this media-consuming teen community. Though Dan uses a cell phone, Dan does not read “Gossip Girl;” thereby Rufus can understand and control Dan more easily.

Furthermore, Dan’s removal from this community also prohibits him from effectively communicating with his sister. When Dan (Penn Badgley) spies Jenny’s boyfriend Asher (Jesse Swenson) kissing another boy, Dan attempts to tell his sister in person. Yet, Jenny will not listen. Thus, Dan seeks help from Blair and Dan’s girlfriend Serena, both of whom understand the power of transmedia storytelling. Blair ruthlessly explains, “All that matters to someone like Jenny right now are the four Gs—Guys, Girlfriends, and Gossip Girl.” Serena kindly attests, “It’s true. Don’t feel bad. Unless it’s coming from one of them, she’s not going to hear it.” Following their advice, Dan decides to text his knowledge of Asher anonymously to Gossip Girl, hoping that Jenny will finally listen to him. Yet, Dan is ineffective once again. Gossip Girl and her readers doubt Dan’s claim. Though Dan physically saw Asher, he has no “proof”—he does not have a picture. Unlike Dan, masters of these transmedia stories understand that multiple media platforms—for example, phone and camera—are necessary for the most successful communicative experiences.
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In the end of the episode, Blair, “The Queen B,” proves herself as one of these masters; she fully understands the power of stories that move through multiple mediums. In a final effort to sabotage her opponent Jenny, Blair steals Asher’s cell phone. When her friends ask what she will do with it, she elusively explains: “It was once said that a person’s eyes are the windows to their soul—that was before people had cell phones!” At the same time, the viewer sees Blair forwarding the texts in Asher’s inbox to the email account on Blair’s computer. While Asher’s cell phone may hold incriminating evidence about him (and Jenny, by association), Blair knows that the stories will only gain power when moving through media. At the conclusion of the episode, when Blair triumphantly reads Gossip Girl’s blog report of Jenny’s tragic fall from grace, the viewer understands the complete transmedia progression of this story. Blair earns her status as high school “royalty” by employing the full potential of each media platform to share her knowledge. Accordingly, through viewer identification with these characters, Gossip Girl thereby encourages such media use to its audience, who can narrativize their own lives by reading the Gossip Girl blog and by using Verizon Wireless phones.

Ultimately, Gossip Girl—the book, the television show, the website—is a transmedia story that promotes transmedia stories. While Jenkins envisions the creative potential in such texts, one cannot deny the glaringly obvious commercial incentives for transmedia storytellers. Still, the promise of these incentives has yet to be fully realized—Gossip Girl struggles in maintaining enough viewers to solidify its place on the weekly television schedule. Do audiences truly want these multi-media entertainment experiences? Or have the conglomerate media industries become so engrossed in moving “content” across media, to achieve total economic potential, that they have overlooked the audience’s desires? The future of Gossip Girl will certainly provide an interesting answer.

Elena Bonomo is a PhD student in Critical Studies at the School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, where she holds a Provost’s Fellowship. She was awarded a MA with Distinction in English and Film Studies from the University of Exeter, United Kingdom in 2005. After being inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa Society, she graduated Summa Cum Laude from Kenyon College in 2004 with a BA in English.

Notes

3 Ibid, 114.
4 Ibid, 137.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
12 Jenkins, 2.