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Drama is the Cure for Gossip: Television's Turn to Theatricality in a Time of Media Transition

ABIGAIL DE KOSNIK

INTRODUCTION

Theatricality as a plot element and narrative device is appearing with some frequency on prime-time television. On a number of contemporary TV dramas and comedies, including *Gossip Girl*, *Mad Men*, and *Glee*, characters repeatedly put on performances that closely resemble stage and street theatre. They spontaneously dance in burlesque shows, play-act using made-up identities in public, sing solo and in choruses onstage, and declaim their innermost secrets to strangers via intense monologues in stylized settings.

Not only do TV characters engage in theatrical performance regularly, but when they perform, they also transform themselves. That is, prime-time television programs of the past few years have been rife with instances of individuals achieving self-realization (“finding themselves”) through acting, singing, and/or dancing in front of audiences – not just for television audiences at home, who watch their antics from a distance, but for audiences who exist within the narratives of the show and who are the performers’ immediate witnesses. In other words, these (fictional) people consciously make spectacles of themselves in the eyes of others, and by exposing themselves in this way, they realize and reveal core truths about themselves.

This article will not argue that there exists a “real” or “authentic” inner self that precedes and can be uncovered by the performing self; following post-modern theorists such as Judith Butler, I posit that there is no “authentic” self, only the subject constructed in speech and actions. Rather, this article is concerned with the question of why it has recently become a priority for U.S. television to depict the existence of a “true” self, which is, for the most part, hidden or concealed (sometimes even from the characters themselves), a self that is then exposed through theatrical performance.

Why has TV begun to make use of theatricality as a Foucauldian “technology of the self”? What motivates present-day television producers and writers to populate their fictions with scenarios in which stage- and street theatre enable individuals to find out and/or display who they “really are”? This article will propose that a significant reason for TV's interest in theatrical performance is the rise of Internet gossip culture. Because the World Wide Web now allows independent users collectively to build, and destroy, individuals' reputations, the postmodern crisis of identity, the question, “Who am I?” that is so problematic in a fluid, mobile, and constantly shifting society, has become largely a crisis of network technology: originators and disseminators of the information and rumours that help or harm specific people's reputations can be anonymous and so remote from those they discuss that “Who am I?” becomes a question whose answer is not entirely, or even mostly, within the individual's control. Rather, individual identity is constructed in, and by, the network. Television's present turn to theatricality offers media consumers the fantasy that they have a chance of finding out who they really are, that, indeed, there is a true, authentic self that remains somewhat stable beneath all their permutations and adaptations and that live dramatic performance (the operational opposite of networked technologies, which, by and large, render users anonymous and interactions untraceable) can offer them an opportunity to connect with this authentic self. In a time when Web-based social media define who we are by constructing (and potentially destroying) our reputations and public personae, television attempts to reassure us that we each have a “real self” that we can access and communicate to others by engaging in dramatic performance. In television narratives today, drama is the cure for gossip.

The first part of this article analyses several contemporary TV dramas and comedies (*Gossip Girl*, *Mad Men*, *In Treatment*, and *Glee*) to illustrate how such programs treat performance in front of live audiences as a tool of self-realization, what Michel Foucault would call a “technology of the self” and Jerzy Grotowski might describe as finding the truth in art. The second section references the work of Ronald Burt, Judith Donath, and Daniel Solove to discuss how Web-based social media determine reputations. The third section builds on the writings of Lynn Spigel and Mimi White to suggest why contemporary television might be using theatricality as a curative for the “gossip culture” of the Internet. The final part of the article argues that postmodern society's pervasive uncertainty about identity has been exacerbated by online social media and that television is attempting to establish its ongoing relevance in a time of media transition by depicting stories of individuals who are able to authenticate their identities by performing live. TV seems to be aligning itself with the positive

attributes of theatre in an effort to strengthen its ability to compete with the Internet as a mode of entertainment.

**THEATRICALITY AS SELF-DISCOVERY IN *GOSSIP GIRL*, *MAD MEN*,
IN TREATMENT, AND *GLEE***

The CW series *Gossip Girl* (2007–present) concerns a specific sliver of high society, a group of super-rich youths in Manhattan’s Upper East Side (UES), who plot and scheme with and against one another as they struggle with issues of family, friendship, sex, school success, and social standing. In a plot device that recurs in each episode, the title character, Gossip Girl, an anonymous blogger who operates as a clearing house for all the rumours that swirl around the UES crowd, posts blog entries and sends out mobile device “blasts” that make public the characters’ secrets and expose any falsehoods they have constructed. Despite all of the money and power wielded by *Gossip Girl*’s privileged characters, therefore, gossip is the most important currency in their world: the UES teens who artfully deceive adults and peers alike in order to further their own interests can be brought low instantly by a Gossip Girl blast; they can also ruin one another by sending Gossip Girl some insider information.

Viewers are asked to identify with the UESers who are the series’ main focus, and what we learn, episode after episode, is that they are not reducible to their intrigues. The gossip that circulates about them does not tell the complete story of any of them. *Gossip Girl* illustrates a predicament increasingly common today: people who have online reputations find that, while Internet rumours circulated about them tell some portion of the truth, it is never the whole truth. Celebrities are closely analysed on various Hollywood Web sites (*TMZ.com*, *justjared.buzznet.com*, *People.com*, or *EW.com*, among others), university instructors are reviewed on *RateMyProfessors.com* and various review sites, and managers at all levels are ranked in a wide range of employment-related Internet forums. While readers of the gossip posted on these sites have a sense that they are privy to many facts about the people discussed, they do not really *know* them. A superfluity of online rumours can coalesce around almost anyone, with the result that all of us need to be watchful custodians of our reputations. If we do not craft our online personae carefully, we risk allowing Internet gossip to define “who we are.”

Using theatrical performance as a plot device, *Gossip Girl* dramatizes the conundrum of how to establish who one “really is” in a gossip-saturated society. In fact, the characters never successfully combat Gossip Girl’s rumour mill or win the right to define their public reputations, but their consolation is that, through the show’s narrative, they can at least discover their true selves for their own sakes. On the one hand, the main characters

on the show are constantly engaged in performance: their machinations typically involve a great deal of artful dissembling. On the other hand, these planned performances generally end in disappointment or crisis, as *Gossip Girl*, drawing on the surveillance of anonymous tipsters who track every movement of the UESers, uncovers all of their ploys. But the main characters also put on different kinds of performances, which are wholly improvised and through which they surprise even themselves.

The most prominent examples of improvised drama leading to a character's self-discovery involve Blair Waldorf, who is equal parts heroine and villainess in the *Gossip Girl* universe. Blair, the queen bee who reigns over the social scene of her elite private high school, strives for excellence in all of her activities and plans out in great detail most of her life's major events. Her own deflowering is no exception. In the series' early episodes, Blair sets up several scenarios that she thinks will encourage her long-time boyfriend, Nathaniel (Nate) Archibald, to finally seduce her, but Nate (who is secretly in love with Blair's best friend) balks at each of these carefully orchestrated productions and leaves Blair untouched.

In episode "Victor, Victrola," Blair finally accepts that Nate does not love her and breaks up with him. Her first stop after the break-up is the burlesque club Victrola, owned by Nate's best friend, the debauched and rakish Chuck Bass. There, on a dare from Chuck, Blair takes the stage alongside the scantily clad burlesque dancers and spontaneously performs with them. She sways seductively to the music as she strips down to her slip. "Who is that girl?" a waiter asks Chuck, gesturing at Blair on the stage, who is earning cheers and catcalls from the mesmerized club-goers. "I have no idea," Chuck replies, a look of awe on his face, as he stands and raises his champagne glass in a toast to Blair.

Later that night, Blair loses her virginity to Chuck in the back seat of his limousine. Blair's "first time" is completely unplanned (unlike all of the "first times" she tried to coordinate with Nate). That she should choose Chuck as her partner and that he should desire her comes as a great surprise to both of them. What Blair's impromptu performance on the Victrola stage has revealed to both is *herself*, the core of personality, which is far more daring, sensual, and risk-taking than her rigid, carefully controlled façade would suggest. Until the moment that Blair literally and metaphorically strips off her outer covering, Chuck "has no idea" who she is. Chuck falls hard for the Blair who suddenly reveals herself to him, and the night in the limousine is the start of a tumultuous affair that continues to be *Gossip Girl's* central love story into the show's third season. When Blair performs spontaneously on Victrola's stage, she finds not only her true self but also her true love.

Blair also finds her innermost self via performance in other episodes. In "Bad News Blair," for instance, Blair's mother, a famous fashion designer,

fires Blair as the model for her new collection's ad campaign and attempts to replace her with her best friend, Serena. In retaliation for Blair's mother's cruelty, Blair and Serena abscond with the clothing collection and wear the stolen dresses in the streets of New York City, taking photos of each other in dramatic poses. In effect, the teen girls stage their own impromptu fashion shoot, mugging for the camera and using exaggerated expressions and gestures that draw the stares of passers-by. Their parody of a fashion shoot, performed in front of bewildered onlookers, can be regarded as street theatre. Blair, who in previous episodes is shown to suffer greatly from her mother's inattention and disapproval, realizes through acting-out in public that she is capable of shrugging off her mother's harsh judgements. She discovers that she is her own person, independent of her mother and willing to oppose her if necessary.

Gossip Girl is not the only TV show currently airing that uses improvised performance to facilitate characters' self-knowledge. On AMC's *Mad Men* (2007–present), Don Draper and his wife Betty put on a show every day for each other and the world. The “show” that Betty enacts is meant to be representative of the falseness of many American housewives' lives during the 1960s: Betty fakes happiness; she costumes herself in beautiful clothes and takes great care with her hair in order to maintain her worth in her husband's eyes (“As far as I'm concerned, as long as men look at me that way, I'm earning my keep,” she tells a neighbour in “Red in the Face”); and she pretends to all outsiders that she and Don have a perfect marriage, while in private, she is full of rage and despair. The “show” that Don habitually puts on is much more complex, for unbeknownst to Betty, Don is an imposter: born into poverty with the name Dick Whitman, he took on another man's (Don Draper's) identity following his stint in the army during the Korean War, and he used the freedom from his past that change allowed to create a new, successful, and prosperous life for himself in New York. So both Don and Betty are constantly acting in their daily lives. But a few times in the course of the show, both characters perform spontaneously rather than in their usual, routine ways, and these improvisations force both of them to confront buried truths.

In “My Old Kentucky Home,” Don flees from a stifling garden party into an empty country club bar, where he meets an elderly gentleman who, like him, is looking for a drink. In the absence of a barman, Don hops behind the bar and begins to mix two Old Fashioneds, and as he does so, the older man begins to speak of his humble beginnings, from which he has evidently ascended to great wealth. In response to the man's story, Don delivers an impromptu monologue. The subject of this monologue is Don's own origins, the misery and deprivation in which he was raised. This is quite remarkable, as Don never discusses his past with his wife or

colleagues for fear of being found out to be a fraud. Framed by the long wooden bar and by the large mirror behind the bar, performed with a bit of stage business (mixing drinks) that all theatre actors know to be one of the greatest challenges of live performance as he gives away details of his fiercely guarded past to a complete stranger, Don's speech can be interpreted as a theatrical performance, but one that is unplanned, unlike all of the crafted performances he gives every day at home and at his office. While the acting that Don does habitually helps him keep his real self buried, the monologue he delivers to the stranger at the country club bar (who turns out to be hotel magnate Conrad Hilton) connects Don to his true identity. His spontaneous performance leads him to remember who he really is; not Don Draper at all, but a poor farmer's son named Dick Whitman. This incident of improvisation at the bar sets the stage, as it were, for Don's secret past finally to be revealed to his wife in later episodes; and when that secret emerges in "The Color Blue," Don and Betty's apparently perfect marriage crumbles, although it is hinted that Don feels as much relief as pain when the charade of his relationship to Betty comes to an end.

Another moment in the slow tearing-down of the illusion of the Drapers' ideal union comes in "Souvenir," when Betty accompanies Don to Rome on a business trip (to visit one of Hilton's hotels). One evening, Betty dresses herself in Italian high fashion, so that she looks more like a star in a Fellini film than an American beauty. While waiting for Don at an outdoor bar, she attracts the flirtatious attention of two Roman men, and because she had spent some time modelling in Italy in her youth, she is capable of conversing with the men in Italian. When Don shows up to take her to dinner, he realizes that the Romans are trying to pick up his wife, and he and Betty pretend to be strangers to one another. Betty easily falls into the role of the alluring and mysterious object of several men's desires, a cool sex goddess who has the power to pick and choose from among her suitors. In the end, Betty chooses Don, as if she truly had a choice to make. The two Italian men moan their disappointment when Betty walks off with the handsome American. But after Betty and Don return from Rome and Betty drops back into her stifling housewife role, she realizes that the witty and cosmopolitan woman in Rome that she had spontaneously pretended to be was much closer to the truth of who she is than the contented wife and mother that she pretends to be in her New York life. The unplanned performance that Betty gives in Italy forces her to become conscious that her authentic self is very different from the part that she plays every day. And after the return from Italy, and her discovery of Don's real identity, Betty ends her marriage to Don.

HBO's *In Treatment* (2008–present) similarly shows people entering into performance without premeditation and discovering who they really are.

The series features a psychotherapist, Paul Weston, in sessions with his patients and in sessions with his own therapist. With very few exceptions, each episode takes place in a single room (either the living room where Paul delivers treatment or his therapist's living room where he is treated) and consists of non-stop dialogue among two or three people. Numerous critics have remarked upon the close kinship between *In Treatment* and theatre, calling it "a television show that [feels] . . . more like a stage play" (Harrison), "a series of one-act two-handers – stage plays where just a pair of actors face off" (Wertz), "essentially a chain of two-person, one-act plays without action, sets or pop-music cues" (Stanley), and "like a two-character play pared down into one critical scene [in each episode]" (Buckley). Although the formal qualities of *In Treatment* prompt comparisons of the episodes with theatre plays, within the diegesis of the television show, every performance given by the characters is unscripted. Paul plays out scenes with his patients in which he only knows the questions and can't predict the answers, and the patients themselves certainly cannot foresee the responses they will give to Paul or the effects that their replies will have on their own thinking. The narrative pattern of *In Treatment* consists of the patients' repeatedly putting on dramatic, emotionally charged, wholly improvised performances in their therapy sessions through which they become aware of deep truths about themselves and the personal histories that they have repressed. *In Treatment* is not a documentary of psychotherapy by any means, so it is important to note that depicting therapy as theatricality was the creative choice of the series producers. Real-life therapy does not usually resemble unrehearsed, unscripted "one-act two-handers," replete with dialogues and monologues that peak at dramatic climaxes where patients are struck with sudden, clear insights into their own subconscious minds.

The FOX musical comedy series *Glee* (2009–present) similarly equates stage performance with self-realization. *Glee* operates on the premise that, when an individual performs before a live audience, she is exposing her truest self to the world. The high school students in the universe of *Glee* can be either misfits on the lowest rung of the social ladder or the rulers of school society, but when they perform as members of the glee-club, the overlooked coolness of the pariahs is revealed and the often suppressed egalitarianism and open-mindedness of the football players and cheerleaders come to the surface. The message of *Glee* is that, no matter how awkward or cynical you may appear in everyday life, you can slough off your outer skin – your social persona – and show off how smart, fair, kind, brave, and talented you are if only you dare to sing show tunes in front of witnesses.

Glee also showcases theatrical performance as a means by which its gay and disabled characters can express their innermost selves, which are often

invisible in everyday social settings. One member of the glee-club, Kurt, blatantly marks himself as queer whenever he sings and dances, but (at least, for the show's first few episodes) must conceal his homosexuality from his father and make excuses when his father catches him practising routines. Another glee-club member, Artie, is confined to a wheel-chair and is a social outcast in the high school; however, in glee-club, Artie is able to dance (by performing choreographed, energetic moves in his wheel-chair), sing, and play instruments, revealing to audiences his extroverted nature. In the halls of the school, Artie's charisma and talents go unseen; onstage, Artie's virtuoso movements and musicality are often the focus of attention.

ART AS TRUTH IN FOUCAULT AND GROTOWSKI

Television's current trend of privileging theatricality recalls Foucault's concept of "technologies of the self." Television today depicts escape from routine as a move towards authenticity and self-realization, a move accomplished through a particular type of action: dramatic performance. Performing is, therefore, a kind of work that individuals must do in order either to attain self-knowledge or to communicate successfully to others who they "really are."

Foucault points out that the ancient Greek injunction, "Know yourself" [*gnothi sauton*], "was always associated with the other principle of having to take care of yourself" [*epimelesthai sautou*] (19–20). Caring for oneself can mean acquiring self-knowledge (it is not a given that each of us has a secure and thorough knowledge of ourselves), and it can also mean engaging in acts that keep us true to our innermost authentic selves. Greeks and Romans who accepted these principles engaged in numerous activities in order to arrive at self-knowing and align their actions with their truest selves; these activities were what Foucault calls technologies or techniques of the self (18–20). Foucault enumerates several techniques of the self employed by Stoic philosophers: letter-writing (in order to disclose one's secrets to another person), examination of one's conscience (in order to compare what one did to what one should have done), *meditatio* [meditation] and *gymnasia* [to train oneself] (34–37). While many techniques of self are purely mental exercises, *gymnasia* "is training in a real situation, even if it's been artificially induced" (37). Foucault points to "rituals of purification" as instances of *gymnasia*.

In contemporary TV narratives, theatrical performance seems to function as this last type of technology of self, as *gymnasia*. Some television characters apparently engage in live performance as a ritual of purification, a means by which they can "know" themselves; as Foucault, interpreting Plato, puts it: "[O]ne must discover the truth that is within one" (35). For

Gossip Girl's Blair and the patients on *In Treatment*, theatricality serves as *gymnasia* in the sense that they do not know their authentic selves intuitively; they must discover the truths within them by actively doing something, by *acting* in a heightened manner that allows them to escape momentarily the social roles they inhabit in their everyday lives.

Performance is a technology of self in a slightly different way for *Mad Men*'s Don and Betty and the high school students of *Glee*, who improvise performances as a means of manifesting in the real world who they feel themselves to be on the inside – their latent, unrealized potential – and as a means of communicating the truth of themselves to others. In *Glee*'s early episodes, Kurt allows his sexual orientation to “come out” when he performs for audiences to a much greater extent than he allows when he is at home with his father; on *Mad Men*, Betty's almost-forgotten sexual power and self-confidence emerge when she adopts a fictional persona for strangers. *Mad Men*'s Don and Betty and *Glee*'s Artie know who they are on the inside, but they generally refuse, or have no opportunity, to show their inner selves in public. Performing allows these characters to reveal the repressed aspects (which are the most authentic, core aspects) of their personalities. The artificiality, the constructedness, of theatrical situations somehow works as *gymnasia* and allows these characters to expose their hidden, authentic selves. Performance is a technology of self-care in such a case just as psychoanalysis is a “talking cure” for troubled psyches. One of the core tenets of psychoanalysis is that disturbed individuals can heal by expressing, in the constructed situation of therapy, their secrets.

The idea that art leads to truth can be found in the writings of many philosophers and artists, such as Martin Heidegger (2000), Victor Shklovsky (1965), and Grotowski (1968). Heidegger claims that the primary operation of the work of art is to reveal, or to “unconceal,” truth (88). Shklovsky argues that art's primary purpose is “defamiliarization” (13), for too much of life becomes habitual to the point of being meaningless to most people, and we need art to wake us up from our dull familiarity with what makes up our existence. Applying Shklovsky's perspective to television today, one might say that TV characters must participate in art making, in the form of live performance, in order to defamiliarize their very identities.

Grotowski, the renowned philosopher of acting, takes a Shklovskian approach to the dramatic arts. He writes,

Why do we sacrifice so much energy to our art? . . . [T]o free ourselves from the lies about ourselves which we manufacture daily for ourselves and for others . . . We fight then to discover, to experience the truth about ourselves, to tear away the masks behind which we hide daily . . . Theatre only has a meaning if it allows us to . . . experience what is real and, having already given up all daily escapes and pretences, in a state of complete defencelessness unveil, give, discover ourselves. (48)

In Grotowski's view, acting allows us to access what is real inside us by "tearing away the masks behind which we hide daily." This uncovering of our true selves is the point of theatre. Grotowski's approach to acting maps precisely onto television's current approach to theatricality: in contemporary television, the individual performs before an audience in order to "experience what is real" and "unveil, give, discover" himself. There may be other ways to know oneself, but for Grotowski, theatrical performance is the highest and most effective technology of the self.

INTERNET GOSSIP CULTURE

Why does contemporary TV so frequently offer a Grotowskian take on theatricality and show characters discovering who they "really are" through performing live in front of audiences?

One possible reason is television's desire to respond to the Internet, which is regarded in some corners of the television industry as a formidable threat to TV as it competes for media consumers' attention and advertisers' dollars. Recent research indicates that increasing use of the Internet has not, in fact, decreased television viewing (Nielsen), and television and the Internet do converge at points: TV fans participate in fan communities online; increasingly, TV viewers watch TV at the same time as they surf the Web; many people watch television content on Web sites such as *Hulu* and *Fancast*; and most TV networks produce Internet-specific content, such as supplementary "webisodes" or interviews with actors and writers of popular shows. Nevertheless, even as the TV industry strives to expand its consumer base and revenue through the Internet, television and the Internet are undeniably rivals on at least one level: for five decades (from the 1950s through the 1990s), television was what Philip Auslander calls "the cultural dominant" (xii), and since the millennium, it has appeared increasingly likely that the Internet will supplant TV in that role. At present, Auslander states, "[T]here is an ongoing, unresolved struggle for dominance among television, telecommunications, and the Internet. The principal players behind each of these would like nothing better than to be your primary source of news, entertainment, art, conversation, and other forms of engagement with the world" (xii). The television industry may partner with the Internet in many ways, but it also struggles to prove that TV offers media audiences benefits that the Internet does not and that TV will continue to be relevant to mass society even if the Internet displaces it as the cultural dominant.

In light of this rivalrous, or at least complex, relationship between contemporary TV and the Internet, we can interpret television's persistent equation of theatricality with self-authentication as a serious critique of Internet culture. One common criticism of the Internet is that the

anonymity of online communications enables people to be uncivil and dishonest, far more so than they would be in face-to-face interactions, and that, as a result, Internet culture is largely gossip culture. Solove writes,

[A]nonymity can make lying easier . . . Anonymity also facilitates deception . . . As sociologist Robert Putnam observes: "Anonymity and fluidity in the virtual world encourage 'easy in, easy out' 'drive-by' relationships . . . If entry and exit are too easy, commitment, trustworthiness, and reciprocity will not develop." In other words, anonymity inhibits the process by which reputations are formed, which can have both good and bad consequences. Not having accountability for our speech can be liberating and allow us to speak more candidly; but it can also allow us to harm other people without being accountable for it. (141)

The Internet, whose content is largely user-generated, facilitates rumour-mongering far more than television does, as it is a one-way broadcasting medium and is hence closed to viewer contribution or participation. A great deal of what the Internet offers media consumers as entertainment is gossip, primarily concerning celebrities but also concerning average people, whose colleagues, students, family members, and acquaintances can post gossip about them on review sites, blogs, and message boards without encountering any negative consequences.

Somebody you've never met can snap your photo and post it on the Internet. Or somebody that you know very well can share your cherished secrets with the entire planet. Your friends and coworkers might be posting rumors about you on their blogs . . . You could find photos and information about yourself spreading around the Internet like a virus. (Solove 2)

Internet gossip culture can build up or ruin individuals' public reputations. People who have online reputations, which is anyone whose name has been mentioned on any Web site and who can, therefore, be "Googled" or looked up on Internet search engines, must take care to defend those reputations, which can be difficult, given how vulnerable they are to anonymous users in the network. "Few things are more valuable than reputation, or more consequential for the success of new ventures," Burt writes. "[R]eputations emerge not from what we do, but from people talking about what we do. It is the positive and negative stories exchanged about you, the gossip about you, that defines your reputation" (1).

Human societies have probably always given rise to fears about possible differences between individuals' public and private identities, and the question of how to ascertain the nature of one's true self has been a problem for philosophers, as we have seen, ever since at least ancient Greek times, but

the Internet may be generating new levels of anxiety about personal identity. If anonymous others can define my public reputation, and if my public self seems foreign to me, if I am often confused with my online double but do not feel identical to that persona, who exists only as a collection of bits of fact and rumour, then how do I determine who I "really" am? Who is the "real me"? And how do I connect with that person? When, where and how can my identity be firmly within my control, and mine alone, rather than subject to shaping in and by the network?

Constructing and safeguarding one's online reputation depends on a multitude of performances. Donath calls the actions that one takes in order to communicate one's identity to another "signalling," and she enumerates several costs of signalling, including "production costs" ("some energy must be expended in the production [of the signal] and some other activity could have been pursued in that time"), "predation or risk costs" ("being observed by an unintended third party" who might use the information you communicate to your disadvantage), and "efficacy costs" ("the costs needed to make the signal perceptible") (12). We might also call these signals technologies of the self: in the case of tending to one's online reputation, "technologies" can be taken quite literally, as social media sites and Internet forums become the technological means for "being concerned with oneself" and "taking care of oneself." We must exert ourselves in order to define who we are to others. Human beings have always had to perform, signal, or work in this way, but the amount of identity signaling required by each of us today is greater than before, and there is a higher risk of failure, for, in addition to safeguarding our real-life identities, we must do the same for our online identities, and those identities are susceptible to sudden, anonymous attacks.

Responding to this climate of anxiety around identity, contemporary television offers viewers the fantasy of *not* having to work to construct themselves. Characters on fictional television shows, as they engage in dramatic action, breaking away from their ordinary routines in order to perform before a "live" audience, appear on viewers' TV screens as instantaneous and seemingly effortless, or at least "natural." Getting up on a stage to perform reads on these shows as a kind of doing-without-thinking, and the connection with self that results is produced automatically, without conscious effort on the part of the performer. Don and Betty Draper, who so painstakingly craft their personae in everyday life, seem to fall into performing their "real selves" in the scenes described above without any difficulty: Don reels off his life story (which he has carefully kept buried, even from his wife) to a stranger without forethought, and Betty inhabits the role of worldly temptress in Rome without a moment's hesitation. For Paul Weston's patients in *In Treatment*, the act of uncovering one's authentic self is effortless, for the show presents psychotherapy as working

by making patients speak before they can think. The patients hear Paul's probing inquiries and reply quickly, talking even if they resist Paul's line of questioning, and before they know it, they have spoken aloud their deepest, most secret truths. Even the *Glee* students, who might be suspected of practising their performances more intensively than any other characters referenced here, often break out into their routines spontaneously, as if their innate talents allow them intuitively to perform elaborate choreography and pitch-perfect harmonies without rehearsals.

Thus, television shows today acknowledge the substantial costs of our having to produce/perform/signal our identities online, under threat of being undermined by the gossip culture that is endemic to the Internet, and present media users with a fantasy of *easy identity*. In television narratives, one does not have to create one's identity, for one's most real and true self is buried deep inside; one does not have to work hard to communicate one's identity to others, for they are present in the room at the moment of one's greatest self-revelation; and one does not have to labour at deciding or shaping one's identity because, even if the "true self" seems difficult to reach, one need only be willing to make a sudden departure from one's usual routine. That departure is portrayed as literally and affectively *dramatic* – happening in an instant, requiring no planning, frictionless and spontaneous and simple, and coded as theatrical performance. After engaging in these dramatics, the individual has self-knowledge: she is in full possession of her identity.

Of the television series discussed above, *Gossip Girl* gives the fullest illustration of the juxtaposition of online identity performance (laborious, requiring attention, prone to failure) and improvised identity performance (easy, requiring no thought or planning, wildly successful). Blair Waldorf performs every day of her life as queen bee and as a deceiver and manipulator, and she tries to keep her darker acts from pinging Gossip Girl's radar, but she never succeeds at staying out of the constant stream of online rumours. However, when she dances for Chuck Bass onstage at his burlesque club, she naturally and easily manifests her authentic self. In that performance, she shows the real Blair; in her everyday life, she is a dissembler and pretender, she works hard to keep her reputation safe, and still has to suffer its being constantly demolished through Gossip Girl's blasts.

THE PROMISE OF GOSSIP VERSUS THE PROMISE OF AUTHENTICITY

In addition, the Internet's entertainment value for mass users resides largely in its consistent and voluminous provision of gossip. As I have argued elsewhere (De Kosnik), insofar as the Internet is a medium that provides entertainment (and not just utility), much of its entertainment content consists of celebrity gossip sites and Web sites that encourage

participants to post gossip about acquaintances, relatives, neighbours, and colleagues.

Gossip on the Internet, while diverting to many, is not without real-world ramifications. On opinion sites like *Yelp*, users post detailed reviews of service providers, such as doctors, dentists, shopkeepers, and therapists, that influence the client base of those business owners and affect their revenues. In January 2008, a chiropractor filed a lawsuit against a former patient who had posted a negative review of him on *Yelp*; the patient's attorney claimed that the patient's posting was "clear opinion that falls squarely within constitutionally protected speech," and the chiropractor's attorney claimed that "if someone, even on *Yelp* or the Internet, publishes a false statement of fact as opposed to an opinion, then that person can and should be held responsible for their words" (Mills). A waiter at a Beverly Hills restaurant who wrote about his interactions (both positive and negative) with famous actors on his Twitter account was fired in 2009. The *Los Angeles Times*'s "Brand X" blog reported that the waiter "doesn't believe what he was doing was wrong. It was more documentation than slander, he asserted." However, the waiter conceded, "[I]f I didn't write anything, I would still have a job" (qtd. in Milian). Celebrity gossip Web sites were correct in their reporting on Tiger Woods's numerous affairs but wrong about Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie's supposed break-up; in early 2010, Pitt and Jolie sued a British tabloid for initiating "false and intrusive" claims that were "widely republished by mainstream news outlets," such as *latimes.com* (Gaskell).

Whether or not Internet gossip is true or false, it complicates people's professional and personal lives in ways that are difficult to predict. Just as it takes time, energy, and thought to maintain one's online reputation and safeguard one's online identity, it takes a similar amount of effort to recognize and navigate the grey zones of Internet gossip. What counts as entertainment, and what might be slander, defamation, or indiscretion that damages oneself or others, are complicated questions. The Internet promises a form of entertainment, therefore, that, while enjoyable for its participatory and collaborative aspects, also has the potential for real-life negative consequences, often unintended. Writing Internet gossip, however pleasurable, can be dangerous, not only for the individuals who are the subject matter, but also for the writer. Reading Internet gossip, although fun, is often confusing, in that discerning fact from fiction can be nearly impossible and one's consumer behaviour, voting habits, and employment can be the subject of rumours that may or may not be true.

Television dramas and comedies today offer fantasies not only of easy identity but also of absolute certainty. The concepts promoted by these TV shows – that each of us has a core self that we can know, be completely sure of, and effectively display to others and that exposing that self yields

only happy outcomes (all of the characters mentioned in this article derive fantastic benefits from revealing their inner selves) – may currently have mass appeal because of the confusions, complexities, and even dangers inherent in Internet gossip. Television characters know, for sure, what constitutes their “real selves,” and they meet with positive results every time they express this certain knowledge. Internet users rarely know what gossip is real and can never be certain of the ramifications of their writing or reading online rumours. As the Internet has established itself as the provider of entertainment comprised of gossip, television has become increasingly a provider of entertainment comprised of fantasies of authenticity and security.

TELEVISION’S HISTORICAL TIES TO THEATRE AND THERAPY

So far, I have explored the possibility that television is currently foregrounding self-discovery through improvised performance as a way of critiquing the Internet for giving rise to great anxieties and confusions over identity and veracity. I have suggested that TV shows today offer viewers the fantasy of “finding themselves” through a type of performing that is quick, simple, and effective, unlike the constant, repetitive, and often ineffective signaling that Internet culture requires. One might say that, in this fantasy, TV privileges theatre and face-to-face interactions that are, in several ways (historically and affectively), the opposite of computer-mediated communications. But this does not entirely explain television’s choice of theatricality as the centre-piece for its fantasy of authenticating the self in the real world rather than constructing one’s identity online.

In fact, television has a long history of aligning itself with theatre. As Brian G. Rose, Auslander, and Spigel note, the earliest TV programs borrowed both their formats and their mode of presentation from theatre. Variety TV shows were modelled on vaudeville, burlesque, and nightclub comedy, while anthology dramas were based on stage plays (Rose 192–99; Auslander 11–24; Spigel 136–39). The first generation of TV executives, stars, and journalists emphasized television’s ability to broadcast live events and performances in order to draw attention to TV’s resemblance to theatre. A 1951 TV-production manual states that television variety shows “possibly owe their success . . . to the feeling they give the home viewer of having a front row seat among the members of a theater audience at a Broadway show. That’s a good feeling to have in Hinterland, Iowa or Suburbia, New Jersey” (qtd. in Spigel 139). Spigel links the traits that have become closely associated with television – intimacy, immediacy, spontaneity, liveness, presence – with television’s explicitly framing itself to consumers as a form of theatre; that is, theatre brought into people’s

homes electronically. "You are there" is the promise made by television to its consumers (136–42), as if TV, by the act of transmitting pictures and sounds from performance halls into living rooms, were, in actuality, transporting people from their living rooms into performance halls.

Thus, early in its existence as an entertainment medium, television located much of its value in its ability to amplify theatre. In contemporary television narratives of self-realization through theatricality, it seems that TV is harkening back to its initial self-definition as a medium that can bring theatre's benefits to mass audiences. One of theatre's great advantages, if one shares Grotowski's outlook on acting, is its ability to make the self present to the self, to facilitate self-discovery. TV, which has always presented itself to consumers as a technology of presence, can make present to today's viewers this feature of theatre: the live performer's becoming present to himself. In calling on its historical affiliation with theatre and its oldest definitions of its own features, television may be attempting to instil in audiences a sense of TV's specialness and worth. A medium that can bring live theatrical performance into the home and that can display live performances of the most important of intimacies – the character's intimacy with her truest self – has value even among today's rapidly proliferating options for media consumption. Theatre has always provided television with ways to sell itself, and theatre is once again helping TV articulate its relevance in the media marketplace today, a marketplace that is increasingly dominated by the digital.

Besides theatre, there is an additional genre of performance with which television has long allied itself: therapy. As White explains, nearly every television program can be regarded as reproducing a therapeutic model:

I understand confession and therapy to be privileged and prominent discourses in contemporary television, engaged by a variety of modes and genres. Problems and their solutions are narrativized in terms of confessional relations. Material prizes and personal advice are sought and won by those who demonstrate a willingness to confess on camera, in public . . . [T]he private exchange between two individuals – in a church or a doctor's office, for example – is reconfigured as a public event, staged by the technological and signifying conventions of the television apparatus. (8–9)

In White's view, the most common television narrative, whether in fictional or non-fictional programs, is the individual who confesses some truth about himself in public. The confession is assumed to be therapeutic to the individual and to help to heal his psychic wounds; but, at the same time, a scenario in which an expert listens to the confession of a person and advises him, a scenario that might be regarded as therapy-like (or resembling a Catholic confessional) and that would normally take place

in private, now takes place, instead, in the public eye; that is, in the eye of the television camera.

White's description of the function of therapy and confession on TV matches closely the fantasy of self-authentication through theatricality so popular on television shows today, which I have been investigating in this article. In all of the shows discussed previously, the protagonist exposes his or her most private self, the core of his or her being, to an audience. This act of self-exposure takes the form of a verbal confession, in some cases, but in other cases it is a dance, or a song, or a performance of an invented role. Although spoken language is not always involved, all of these acts can be interpreted as confessions, for they all are personal revelations. They are also therapeutic, in the sense that all of the individuals in these TV narratives are able to improve themselves and their lives dramatically by connecting with their innermost selves through performing. Of all the shows discussed, *In Treatment*, of course, dramatizes the therapeutic nature of confession most literally. *In Treatment* illustrates White's claim that television puts on public display the most sacrosanct forms of one-on-one counselling.

White's writing dates to the early 1990s, but she traces the history of television's structuring its narratives as therapeutic discourse to television's beginning. Advertisements and soap operas, especially, emphasized the healing benefits of confessing, of unveiling one's deepest secrets to a watching public. Just as television has always classified itself as similar to theatre, but better than theatre, because TV brings theatre to so many more people than could fit into a theatre space; so, too, has television always presented itself as resembling the confessional and the therapy session, but better than therapy, because TV shows the viewer many more intimate self-disclosures than the viewer could ever encounter on his own, in that way feeding his hunger for gossip about strangers while simultaneously modelling for him what "healthy" behaviour is (telling the truth, or displaying the truth, to others). The gossip promoted by television is, therefore, nobler than that offered up by the Internet because watching television confessions may spur one to begin a self-help/self-improvement project.

The television industry has attempted for decades to convince audiences that watching TV is, itself, a form of therapy. White mentions a number of articles published in *TV Guide* during the 1980s that promote "the idea that television functions therapeutically within a familial and interpersonal context. Watching television can help or hinder your relationship with your spouse and children. Television can speak a therapeutic discourse" (25). She quotes one *TV Guide* author who writes, "TV can provide current information on common problems. It can, while respecting privacy, encourage the discussion of feelings" (29). All of the equivalences

to therapy that belonged to TV in the past – the structuring of the television narrative as a confession, the making public (televising) of the therapist's interaction with patients, the theory that the act of watching TV can lead one to undergo therapy – are seemingly combined in the theatricality-as-authenticity convention that recurs on various TV shows currently.

What contemporary television producers appear to be aiming at, then, in highlighting TV's closeness to both theatre and therapy and in making theatre-as-therapy a central trope in their narratives, is a link to TV's historically successful value propositions. Television is currently in a highly transitional phase of its evolution. If it does not want to disappear as a business and lose its mass appeal, then it needs to prove to media consumers that it has worth that cannot be duplicated by the Internet. In depicting theatricality as a technology of the self, the TV industry falls back on its kinship to theatre (television's ability to make present what appears to be distant, its evocation of intimacy and liveness and immediacy) and on its kinship to therapy (television's capacity to show viewers the most personal selves of its characters, their most private moments of confessing and receiving counsel, and television's potential for inspiring viewers to experience for themselves the benefits of confessing and therapy).

Television, which was the cultural dominant for fifty years, finds itself, in the twenty-first century, in the position of having to defend its relevance, having to rally and broadcast the reasons why it still matters. To this end, TV is calling up arguments that it has used since the 1950s, arguments that add up to the fact that television is theatre and therapy all at once. Television narratives display people's most intimate journeys – their inward journeys, their diving into their innermost core to discover their authentic selves – as public performances, and this is simultaneously a critique of anonymous Internet gossip culture, with its lack of intimacy and cool distance from its subjects, and an attempt to proffer much better gossip than the Internet can, in the form of high personal drama. Ultimately, television uses drama, a technology of the self, as both a cure for Internet gossip culture and as a serious competitor to it.

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ABSTRACT: This article examines a number of currently airing television dramas and comedies (*Gossip Girl*, *Mad Men*, *In Treatment*, and *Glee*) that depict theatricality – live performance – as a means by which characters achieve self-realization and authenticity. Television today may be interested in presenting theatricality as what Michel Foucault calls a "technology of the self" as a way to distinguish TV from the Internet. The Internet is largely comprised of gossip, and social media demand that all of us carefully safeguard our online reputations, lest we fall victim to unfounded rumours posted by anonymous users. Contemporary television narratives offer the fantasy of "easy identity," as characters spontaneously discover their "real selves" by engaging in theatrical performances and clearly communicate who they "really are" to others, with only positive results. Television thus uses theatricality as a means of establishing its ongoing appeal in an Internet era.

KEYWORDS: gossip, theatricality, technologies of self, authenticity, *Gossip Girl*, *Mad Men*, *In Treatment*, *Glee*