

The Television Social Network: Exploring TV Characters

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Abstract

This paper explores changes in television criticism through the lens of the online social network. This new lens reinvigorates television scholarship to re-interpret character *relationships* as central to the television text. By looking at the complex connections between text, character, and audience the network engenders, we can see how today's television links audience to character through a "social networking mode" within the text, redefining and updating television scholarship for the 21st century.

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As White (2006) argues, today's multi-media environment links television studies to new media studies in both aesthetics and content (p. 342). Our emerging digital society is subtly changing habits and expectations of our media (Hampton, Goulet, Raine, & Purcell, 2011). Television studies can become the prime example of what Gauntlett (2009) and Merrin (2009) have both dubbed "Media Studies 2.0," a new focus in critical media analysis that takes into account not only the convergence of technology, but also the increased convergence of production and consumption. To understand this moment of media confluence, we must recognize that "each medium is touched by and in turn touches its neighbors and rivals" (Thorburn & Jenkins, 2004, p. 11). Although many factors influence this change in contemporary media studies—including the advent of new technology, new industry practices that take account of these technologies, and global media conglomerates that find financial incentive to pursue them—I want to focus on the aesthetic and structural transformations of television as seen through online social technologies. Investigating aesthetics is not simply a value-laden venture, but rather one that is central to exploring the televisual medium (Mittell, 2009a). As Thorburn (1987) states, "we must be able to read [television] texts in something of the way the audience experiences them: as stories or dramas, as aesthetic artifacts" (p. 165). Today's audiences may experience television as just one component of a larger media environment, using the aesthetics of other media to read what they're seeing on the small screen. The "networks" they are part of in their online lives may, then, help structure and define the way they read television today; so too they should influence the way scholars read television.

In this article, I'll be defining a "network" in a general sense, as a structure with an inherent *interwoven complexity*. In this structure, elements are related to other elements in more than one manner, and objects intersect with one another multiple times. What I'm calling the *social network mode*—an analysis that uses a *network* as a lens through which we can examine a text—can investigate fictional narratives that overflow with characters. It is not limited to today's media: in fact, one could easily argue that *The Iliad's* large cast of characters and engaging temporality foreshadowed much of today's complex networked society. Importantly, then, using a social network mode as a heuristic doesn't so much reveal a *new* characteristic of television, but rather is a new *critical mode* of television scholarship. That is, I'm not so much interested in seeing how television today is or is not *different* from television of the past (Booth, 2011), but rather in how changing the way we are looking, changes what we see.

Specifically in this paper, the *social network mode* focuses on the way character relationships intersect in complex television narrative. In any definition of narrative, "virtually no attention has been paid to the notion of character" (Altman, 2008, p. 12). The previous literature that examines characters on television has tended to analyze them structurally, using a typography of particular character traits (Pearson, 2007; Pearson, 2009). This is not an uncommon method, for television scholars have often used a form of literary criticism as the basis for their analysis (Allen, 1985; Allen, 1992; Askwith, 2009; Newcomb, 1982). For example, Pearson (2007) identifies six traits scholars can use to help illustrate character uniqueness and audience identification, looking closely at one character from *CSI* (2000). In her 2009 contribution to *Reading Lost*, a critical analysis of the eponymous television series, she does a similar reading of John Locke.

New types of criticism based on social networks, however, can reveal a greater connection between characters and audiences. Instead of seeing characters as mere components of narrative, the social network mode reveals them as links in a network of multiple identifying “selves,” of which the viewers can also be a part. For example, Menon (2007) illustrates how the fan community surrounding the show *Once & Again* “is so personally invested in the phenomenology of the nexus between the characters’ social relationships and their own relationships inside and out of the message board sites that the members are driven to adopt collective action so that the show will stay on the air as long as possible” (p. 343) In this article I’ll be focusing my analysis on the way character relationships in contemporary long-form television shows with large casts mirror contemporary online social network relationships. This should not be read as though the social network mode only applies in contemporary situations; merely that these programs are ripe (and relevant) for analysis. Indeed, past primetime shows like *Hill Street Blues* (1981) also relied on large casts, and could function as texts for social network analysis. The soap opera also arguably functions as a character-driven genre. Allen (1985) demonstrates how character relationships are crucial to understanding soaps: “the superficial meaning of a situation common to all soap operas is instantly overwhelmed by the deeper significance of that event in the specific *character network* in which it occurs” (p. 86, my emphasis).

Today, however, the social network (and scholarship on the network itself) offers useful insights into the complex nature of character, and the intimate relationship between character and audience. What Allen (1992) once described as a unique feature of soaps (“These complex character networks in American daytime soap operas distinguish them even from their prime time counterparts” (p. 108)) is now becoming standardized across primetime narrative (Mittell,

2006). Much of today's television emphasizes complex relationships between scores of characters, and relies on the audience's inherent understanding of the network of relationships between characters to make sense of them all. This is but one aspect of what Mittell (2006) calls the "narrative complexity" of today's television, a structure of television with "episodic forms under the influence of serial narration"—that is, shows "[reject] the need for plot closure within every episode" and foreground "ongoing stories across a range of genres" (p. 32). Yet, for Mittell, character relationships are actually *backgrounded* in these complex shows:

While certainly soap opera narration can be quite complex and requires a high degree of audience activity to parse out the web of relationships and backstory evoked at every plot turn, narratively complex programming typically foregrounds plot developments far more centrally than soaps, allowing relationship and character drama to emerge from plot development in an emphasis reversed from soap operas. (p. 32)

The social networking mode, instead, seeks to foreground these character relationships in order to elucidate in greater detail audience/character connections.

Because studying television is an enormous undertaking, however, a few caveats are in order to clarify my argument. Rather than focus on the way the television industry uses social networks to engage viewers, or on the way producers use social networks to discuss television (Ross, 2008), I am specifically looking at the way *social networks* can be used to examine *television textuality*. Further, I do not believe that focusing on television character networks comes about as a direct result of the advent of social networks, but rather the advent of one facilitates a worthwhile critique of the other. Finally, I do not intend argue that an increased *cast* necessarily leads to (or from) a change in the nature of our (off- or online) relationships. Rather,

I want to evaluate the way that the *network* can be used as a metaphor for television characters, as articulated through online social media use.

Social Networks on Television

Perhaps the most noticeable characteristic the social network mode reveals is the temporal discontinuity of television narrative. Within a network, there is an inherent tension between the *structure* of the network and an individual's *experience* with that network. Namely, as Ryan (2001) illustrates, any networked organizational structure necessarily is linked in multiple ways; multiple *readings* are thus possible. However, individuals who “read” the network—traversing it once—experience that network as a single pathway. In this case, users control the linearity of the experience, while producers control its inherent nonlinear structure.

The television works similarly as a structure that blurs the distinction between linear experience and nonlinear structure. On the one hand, television as a whole is structured nonlinearly: what is on one channel has little to no connection to what is on another channel.¹ Viewership, too, can be experienced nonlinearly, especially given the influx of technologies like the DVR, the DVD, and online stream: viewers have the option to watch television on their own time, and not be beholden to a particular day/time (Brooker, 2009). On the other hand, the actual *content* of watching television still very much depends on the *linear* experiences of the narrative. The “evening’s viewing” of television programming that Williams (1974) termed “flow” may have shifted over the past decades because of new technology and thousands more outlets, but the practice of television viewing itself still involves the linear flow of one story coming directly after another (p. 86).

In both cases—networking and television programming—temporal discontinuity reflects a straddling of a linear/nonlinear divide, and rests on the dynamic interaction between production and consumption. For most users of social networking, it is next to impossible to “see” an entire network: and one’s experience with the network will necessarily be unique. The same is true of television viewership as well. The British Cultural Studies tradition offers insights into the way audiences play a role in actively decoding television narrative (see Allen 1992; Fiske, 1987; Jenkins 1992; Radway, 1991). Active reading, according to Allen (1992), requires “gap filling,” the process by which members of an audience provide elements in a narrative that do not appear in-text. Taken as a metaphor for the interaction between the linearity of television programming and the nonlinearity of television viewership, the network works to help redefine how meaning is made from fragmentation in television narrative.

This fragmentation lies at the heart of postmodernist views of contemporary narrative and textuality (Boje, 2001; Booth, 2010; McGee, 1990). I want to argue, however, the social network mode represents a departure from this style of analysis. For Boje (1994), the postmodern narrative revels in the multitude of voices engendered by “pluralistic participation” (p. 449). Boje (2001) later describes it as a “polyphonic” narrative which functions as a chaotic “fragmentation of time and space” (p. 132). Similarly, Creeber (2008) suggest that today’s serialized television narrative “is the ultimate postmodern medium, one that most effectively portrays the fragmentation of meaning throughout contemporary thought” (p. 7).

But the social network mode illustrates how television narrative is not strictly *fragmented*, but rather exists as a dualistic model made up of both fragmentation and stability. As viewers we have the power to watch television in a fragmented, nonlinear fashion, but television narrative is filmed and distributed in an intentional order. This form of postmodern

fragmentation, instead, seems more applicable to scholarship on interactive media like video games. For example, Filiciak (2003) shows that the fragmented nature of gameplay—multiple levels, character traits developing over time—replaces player identification with player “*introjection*—the subject is projected inward into an ‘other’” (p. 91). Similarly, McMahan (2003) shows how video game players become *immersed* (getting caught up in the world of the game), *engaged* (investing the game with human meaning), and/or *present* (picturing themselves as straddling the game world and the real world) in the game world. Players of video games, these authors argue, become *participants* within the narrative, structuring and forming it as they play. Television, of course, is different: one cannot change the course of the narrative as one watches. But television narrative itself can *appear* out-of-temporal-order as well, both due to syndication, online streaming, and other disjointed viewing opportunities as well as to narratives depicting temporal complexity (Booth, 2011).

This dualism of fragmentation and stability appears if we look an example of the complex plot and characters of *Lost* (2004). The show *Lost* features over twenty-five “main” characters over the course of its six seasons, each one linked to the others in at least one seemingly coincidental way. The characters form an interrelated web of connection, the connections a linked network of intersections: this connectivity is noted in much writing about *Lost*, from popular press articles in *Wired* (Haynes, 2010), which feature “maps” of the relationships, to the DVD box sets themselves, which have special features that graphically link characters together. Examining *Lost* from a narrative standpoint provides a fragmented sense of temporal coherence: the narrative events are distributed across a framework of discontinuity (Askwith, 2009; Kogan, 2006). But looking at the relationship between *characters* of *Lost* as the main organizational unit reveals more coherence than the fragmented story. Indeed, “following the *Lost* storyline by

watching only one character's key episodes in order would provide a viewer with the whole story so far for one character (albeit, still a story of fragments), but the larger story of all the survivors would remain fragmented" (Gillan, 2010, p. 159). Thus, in order to understand the full *Lost* story, it's much more important to see the hypertextual links between the characters; much like, to understand the full articulation of the online persona, it's crucial to see the influence and participation of an individual's entire social network. I believe that the social network site can be used as a fictionalized, highlighted, and narrativized way of representing this new mode of criticism.

Character and Audience Social Networking

Focusing on the social network mode as it maps narrative, therefore, helps usher in a renewed emphasis in television criticism on character relationships. "Character" becomes the stable element of a show that plays with the depiction of time as a shifting temporal continuity.² As Somers (1994) states, narrative is inherently about relationships: "the chief characteristic ... is that [narrative] renders understanding only by *connecting* (however unstably) *parts* to a constructed *configuration* or a *social network* of relationships" (p. 616). For Somers, the key function of narrative is not to *transmit* a plot, but rather to *connect* audience to plot, to unite "an individual's understanding of self and the construction of identity [with] a degree of purpose and unity" (Williams & Keady, 2006, p. 163). Taking Somers' analysis of narrative as ontologically linked to identity and applying that conception to the social network mode of television criticism, we can see a new conception of audience identification with character.

Specifically, Somers (1994) describes how narrative and identity are intimately and ontologically connected: "it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social

identities” (p. 606). But in order to make this claim, Somers has to differentiate between different levels of narrative. Traditionally, critics have seen narrative as representational; that is, narrative was seen as a *form* that imposed structure on the “chaos of lived experience” (p. 613). Narrative in this conception is *descriptive*, illustrating one particular view of an experience. Somers argues for shifting the conception of narrative to be more *ontological* in nature: that is, narratives become *prescriptive* as they “guide actions...people construct identities...by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories” (p. 614). However, both Somers’ (1994) description of the different level of narrative and Boje’s (1994; 2001) description of postmodern narrative are based in social science methodologies (Williams & Keady, 2006). More recent critical readings have focused on television character relationships as indicative of changing cultural issues, like political economy, identity and sexuality (Knaggs, 2010; Levine, 2005; Meyer, 2010). Focusing on the social network mode further examines critically these audience/character connections.

The social network mode of television criticism sees characters in a television show as “nodes” within a complex social network, one that also includes audience members. In an online social network, everyone becomes a “character,” including ourselves (Booth, 2010). We type ourselves into being (Sundén, 2003), creating and delineating a specific set of characteristics that define “us” as “us.” In many ways, the creation of a digital “persona” yields informative connections to the way we all constantly perform our identities, creating images and characters depending on the situation and audience with whom we engage. This concept of identity construction stems from Goffman (1959), who noted that the labels we give ourselves (or which are given to us) illustrate the different roles we play everyday: professor, son, viewer, husband. Online social networks externalize and make visible the process of “persona” creation as an

abstraction of the self. Such persona creation, as boyd (2007) notes, is deliberate: people “carefully choose what information to put forward” (p. 12). Yet, we are always constrained in an online environment: by the design of the site (we can’t fill in forms that don’t exist), by the influences of culture (who wouldn’t drop 15 pounds if it only takes a mouse-click to do so?), and by the limits our own social network defines. Any identity performance is always limited by the social context in which it exists: Goffman (1959) argues that any identity performance constantly tests these limits through “concealed practices” or “particular performances” (p. 64).

Identity theory connects to Somers (1994) ontological conception of narrative: she argues that “people act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives—however fragmented, contradictory, or partial” (p. 618). We are part of many social networks, not just one or two: just as we are viewers of multiple television shows with multiple character networks. We take our characteristics from others within our many social networks, just as others take their characteristics from us. The varied and personal interrelationships provide the most tangible and salient feature of these social networks, as they “enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks” (boyd & Ellison, 2007, ¶6). The friends one has on Facebook may reveal more than their profile as to their likes and dislikes, their geographical location, and their life history. When we create our online identities, they are also woven into the networks to which we adhere. We become representations not just by who we write ourselves to be online, but also by the digital friends we have. By examining the network of people whom we have “friended,” we publically proclaim our connections within what boyd (2011) calls “networked publics,” or spaces where “the imagined collective ... emerges” (p. 307).

The networks in our online lives provide a metaphor for understanding television's multiple character relationships. On television, there is a strong emphasis on relating character to plot (Pearson, 2009). Yet, there are always excess facts, spare character miscellanea, that "may be highly relevant to character development but irrelevant to plot development (p. 141). For example, in the fourth season of *Torchwood* (2006), the character Esther has a mentally unhinged sister who has social services take her children away. This action is superfluous to the plot, but reflects heavily on both Esther and her sister's characters. To view characters as subservient to plot means ignoring or eliding this "extra" textuality. But viewing the character network as central to the show allows us to imagine these tidbits as extra components on a social network, information gleaned through the ubiquitous flow of communication online.

If viewers can see *television* as a giant social network, then perhaps viewers can see themselves participating with it. Indeed, some viewers already do feel connected to characters: discussion boards online about television programs are populated with statements about the relationships viewers have with characters. For example, on one particular *Heroes* (2006) discussion board ("Bring Back Heroes"), users have described the connection between the characters and their families, the believability of the characters, the similarity of the characters to the Kennedy clan and other celebrities, and their desire to see "what happens next" with the characters.³ Few people discuss wanting to know more about the narrative: they seem more concerned with character development. Of course, this is just one discussion board out of thousands online, but it demonstrates that just as we sit in the center of our own personal community online, what Baym (2010) identifies as a "networked individualism," so too do we sit in the middle of the relationships we see onscreen (p. 90). The difference is that we are silent members of our television social network, barely participating in the social interaction. In some

respects, this is the key difference between social networks and television character networking: I cannot intervene in my television show's plot, but I can in my friend's. Yet, in many ways the two are not so different. We are both *enabled* and *limited* by the narratives in which we are fixed. The difference between online social networks and TV character networks is not a binary, but rather a continuum: we *can* influence characters on television, through our fannish behavior (fannish dislike of Nikki and Paulo on *Lost* helped the producers kill them off (Askwith, 2009, p. 165)), our off-line letter writing (Jenkins, 1992), and/or our on-line creations (producers of *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) included the character-defining line "I'm the Juggernaut, bitch," a reference to a popular Internet meme of the same name).

And even knowing that the relationship between television characters and viewers is one-sided, we can still feel emotionally connected to those characters. Somers (1994) argues that we make sense of our self by comparing it to others' stories (p. 614). Television provides one type of story; our social networks another. The point here is that both types of stories are structurally similar. Recent Internet media research about the network argues that conceptualizing our society through the lens of the networked web can help elucidate some of the issues of connectivity that undergird our conception of contemporary culture (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2001; van Dijk, 2005). Yet, before the advent of the Web, research on the impact of media on identity revealed significant shifts in the way we conceptualize our "selves." For example, Meyrowitz (1984) has described how electronic media affect and change our interpretation of social and public "places." These new senses of place then "locate the self in new hybrid arenas of action; they mesh public and private, beckon new types of performances, and form new collective configurations" (Cerulo, 1997, p. 397). In these respects, "by bringing many different

types of people to the same ‘place,’ electronic media have fostered a blurring of many formerly distinct social roles” (Meyrowitz, 1984, p. 6).

The rise of social media however, has deepened and expanded the ways we can discuss the interaction between media and media audiences. As Fiske and Hartley (2003) show, we often conceptualize the TV audience as one of two extremes: “In most discussions of television the audience is characterized ... as the individual viewer, or as the many millions of viewers for any one programme. But the audience normally experiences itself in neither of these ways” (p. 85). That is, as viewers, we don’t recognize ourselves as solitary, nor do we necessarily recognize ourselves as part of an immense global group, but rather we see ourselves as individuals within more personal and social networks. Even when by ourselves, we have an understanding of the collective viewership of those in immediate *social proximity* to ourselves. Online social and social media have made these social connections stronger and more realizable than ever before. We all have our own network of social proximity whenever we watch television: for example, my friend Brian got a text message after every episode of *24* (2001), and my uncle finds out my opinions about this week’s *Doctor Who* (2005) over email, even though he lives half a globe from me. Even though I may watch *Glee* (2009) alone and I may intellectually know that it’s being watched by millions of others, it’s only the middle of these two extremes, my network of social proximity, that I think about—the dozen or so of my friends and colleagues with whom I will chat the next day. Our online social networks on Twitter help foster this feeling of community. To facilitate this interaction, producers have started creating “character” tweets (tweets sent from characters on the show) which seem to be attempting to foster a community (Simmons 2011).⁴ When audiences desire this form of active identification, social media tools engage to provide it.

Character (Social) Networking: Representing Social Networks on Television

To follow a complex television narrative network necessarily means being actively engaged with the material. Whether that engagement manifests like McMahan (2003) describes for video games, as “near-obsessiveness” (p. 69), or whether it is merely following a character’s tweets, television engagement has become a common mode of spectatorship (Jenkins, 2009). As Kristen Daly (2010) describes, this type of engagement is a “natural consequence of digital media. Computer and digital users have been trained by their immersion in digital culture to participate in/with what they consume” (p. 82; Johnson, 2006, p. 108). The massive online encyclopedia *Lostpedia* exemplifies this participation. As I have previously described, *Lostpedia* represents the interactive potential of media-based wikis, where fans use “the web not only to collaborate...but also to produce” (Booth, 2009, p. 373). Completely constructed from online fan efforts, *Lostpedia* is an online repository for fan collected research, summary, spoilers, and debate about the television show *Lost*. As Mittell (2009b) has shown, *Lostpedia* “enables fan engagement, structures participation, and distinguishes between various forms of content” (¶0.1). For example, over 3000 words have been written by fans about one of the minor characters on the show, Vincent the dog, which detail all his comings and goings onscreen, his relationship to the other characters, his plot usefulness, and show trivia.⁵ Over 500 individual edits and scores of users have construct the content of this page, indicating the way individuals can participate with the media they consume. Turning from the general idea of participation, I want to show how social networks can be used to examine the complex relationships between characters and audiences on television. When we examine television in this way, we can see more than just representations of ways of being: we can also see an ontological base from which we draw

identity inspiration (Somers, 1994). We see ourselves in the narratives on television: just as “stories guide action,” so too can “people construct multiple and changing identities” within those stories (Williams & Keady, 2006, p. 164).

To illustrate this construction, I offer a variety of examples from contemporary scripted narrative television programs. My focus here is on shows with “narrative complexity” (Mittell, 2006). Long-form narrative typically has serialized narration, multiple character relationships, an immense backstory, a fully realized world, and allows several simultaneous plotlines. Creeber (2008) argues that long-form narrative television adds a sense of “realism” to television. As Gwennlian-Jones (2004) shows, long-form narrative “assumes the familiar complexity of the material world, sharing its three-dimensional clutter and myriad connective possibilities” (p. 93). In other words, long-form narrative has all the complexity of “real life.”

In shows that demonstrate Mittell’s “narrative complexity,” and in which multiple character relationships function to complicate the complex narrative, the social network function reveals a variety of constructs. For example, to conceptualize *Lost* as a massive online social network mirrors the social networks we have in our own lives. We only know certain things about television characters; we only know certain things about our friends online. For example, Jack Shepherd represents a key node in the *Lost* social network. The ostensible protagonist of the series, Jack has multiple connections to a variety of characters throughout the show, many of which came before his time on the island. For example, Jack’s father, Christian, also fathered Claire (through an affair), so Jack and Claire are half-siblings. Sawyer also meets Christian in a bar, and talks about Jack to him. Jack, a surgeon in the world off the island, operated on a woman named Sarah (whom he later married), instead of Adam Rutherford, who came into the operating room at the same time as Sarah, and was the father of Sharon and Boone. Jack also met

Desmond before the island when both were running the steps of a stadium together. Jack and Locke “met” in the Flash-Sideways season, when paralyzed Locke visited Jack the surgeon. If we take all of Jack’s connections (pre-), (post-) and (inter-)island and imagine that he had created a social network profile linking each of them, we can get a better idea of the complexity between these relationships. In online social networks it is common to have multiple friends from variety of backgrounds “mingling” together on the profile: and as social network services suggest further connections (“friends of friends”) the connections can become even more tenuous. On *Lost*, we can follow this metaphor if we then link one of Jack’s connections, Desmond, to his own connections—Desmond knew Kate’s father, Desmond met Hurley in a fast food restaurant, Desmond met Eloise, Daniel’s mother, Desmond time travels and visits Daniel in the past, Desmond passed Charlie on the street—then even more connections can be made, and a complete network can be mapped (see *Lostpedia* for more connections⁶).

Specifically, the multitude of characters in *Lost*, and a narrative that follows one main character in each episode, means that certain events are revisited within the narrative framework of the show. And upon each revisit, new information is revealed or character motivations uncovered. This parallels our investigation of individuals on social network sites: as more information is added to the “narrative” of someone’s life, a clearer picture of that person and all their networks forms. As examples of this, take the characters of Nikki and Paulo. Although Nikki and Paulo appear only briefly in the narrative of *Lost*, they represent in micro how the social network mode functions in macro across the show. Originally, the characters were conceived to detail what some of the less-crucial characters were doing on the island (Mittell, 2009a). But Nikki and Paulo also exist to help elucidate characteristics of the other protagonists, as well as to serve as entry points for the audience to become more involved in the goings-on on

the island. Nikki and Paulo are, in other words, producer-created “Mary Sues,” audience surrogates that interact with the main characters.⁷

In the episode “Exposé,” Nikki and Paulo’s backstory is revealed in flashbacks to their time earlier on the island. For example, their first flashback details the time period immediately after the plane crash. Nikki, dazed after the crash and wandering around the fuselage of the plane, runs into Boone, who asks her if she has a pen. Sharp viewers will remember that Jack Shepherd had stopped Boone performing mouth-to-mouth resuscitation incorrectly, and Boone had (in a fit of quackery) decided to find a pen in the first episode to perform an emergency tracheotomy. The reveal in “Exposé” is telling, as it allows the audience to see the minute, networked connections between characters, and to revise the meaning of previous plot points. Since they are both secondary characters who observe the action from afar, Nikki and Paulo parallel the viewing stance of the audience. They watch the main characters just as we watch them. Nikki and Paulo are the receivers of action, not the actors. It is telling that when they are mistakenly buried alive in their finale episode, “Exposé,” Nikki’s eyes pop open at the end: even as she dies, she is watching the action of others. This watch/watched dichotomy parallels our social media use as well: we make profiles not just to be seen, but also to explore the lives of other people. The scopophilic nature of social media fosters a continual sense of exploration: Gauntlett (2011) argues that this leads to a “mutual engagement and community, as well as an opportunity to try and impress like-minded people with your interests and activities” (p. 96). Like Nikki and Paulo, we more often than not watch the interaction of others (as sites like Failbook so humorously document⁸), occasionally venturing our own opinions. Social networking turns us into a community of followers.

Two years before the premiere of *Lost*, a show aired with a similar character networking. *Boomtown* (2002) also features multiple perspectives on a single event. The seven main characters—two police officers, two detectives, a politician, a paramedic, and a reporter—all encounter a crime from different viewpoints. Individual one-time characters in each episode also feature their own perspective, each of which revises portions of the narrative that have already been revealed. As the narrative of each episode unfolds, each character's particular perspective is depicted, uncovering the larger mystery. For example, in the second episode of the series, "Possession," the audience is privy to a phone call from a telemarketer, who overhears a murder plot on the phone. The audience is led to believe that it's a family dispute, when a husband confronts his wife's lover. Seeing the representation of the fight even further solidifies this response, as we see a pudgy older man aiming a gun at a young, muscular stud (a stereotypical male adulterer). Yet, further in the episode, and from additional characters' vantage points, the audience gains a deeper understanding of the situation: it is revealed that the older man is a john who frequents a sex club, and had hired the young woman to pretend to be his wife. Additionally, the aforethought adulterer is actually the real husband of the young woman. *Boomtown* revisits the scene where the older man aims the gun at the "adulterer" a number of times, and from a number of vantage points (the older man's, the young woman's, and the young man's). Additionally, the investigation is revealed through the detective's viewpoints, the crime scene through the officers', and the death through the paramedic's, each depicted out of linear order. Through temporal play, the meaning of the scene changes due to the networked perspectives of the characters, revealed through the social network mode of criticism. The networked understanding of character in *Boomtown* mirrors a similar networkization of "stories" in our online social media lives. Reading through profiles, we can often only get portions of

stories, snippets from a particular perspective. In fact, by reading profiles, we are necessarily always seeing things through the point-of-view of each individual. Only by taking a step back and comparing stories can we, the story-creator, posit the events in our minds. The nonlinearity of the network structure reveals; the linearity of the network experience conceals.

The science-fiction program *Fringe* (2008) also demonstrates the networking of characters, as depicted by the “swapping” of bodies through alternate realities. In the show two universes exist in parallel to each other, and inhabitants with special abilities (including protagonist Olivia Dunham) are able to travel between these two universes. In the third season, the Olivia from the militaristic—yet prophetically familiar—universe replaces the Olivia from our own universe. The doubling of the character represents an ongoing struggle in the series, as male lead Peter, with whom our-Olivia has a flirtatious relationship, begins to date alter-Olivia, not knowing that she had been replaced. The idea that a doppelgänger exists that could replace us has a social media parallel, as our profiles can mirror, but never replace, our offline identities. As Jacob van Koksrijk (2008) has shown, a created identity online can “exist independently from human control and can (inter)act autonomously in an electronic system” (p. 13). That is, while we can control what we put on our profiles, we have no control over what others post, nor what corporations like MySpace or Facebook do with the information we put online. By creating alternate identities online, we are quite literally creating doppelgängers of our selves, articulating a personality online that may look similar, but is remarkably different from what is presented offline. But we take that personality as real: as Astrid remarks to our-Olivia when she returns to our universe, “[Peter] thought that she was you. Whatever feelings that Peter had they were not about her. They were about you. And they were real. They still are” (Schapker & Owusu-Breen, 2010). So too are our profiles real; but they are also separate from us. Because our social

networking profiles are our digital doppelgängers, when we experience an online connection between them and another digital persona, there is a fundamental separation between entities. Yet we still feel connected to it, and violated if it is breached (as in Dibbell's (1993) famous depiction of a rape in cyberspace). Television teaches us how to separate these two entities; how to survive in a digital "alternate reality."

This social networking mode of contemporary television can be seen in shows other than those produced in the States. For example, both the characters and the narrative of the new *Doctor Who* (2005) series are inherently networked, as the Doctor and River Song intersect in a variety of ways throughout time. In this way, *Doctor Who* uses these two characters to represent a temporal construction of networking that differs in type, if not in structure, from *Lost*'s, *Fringe*'s, and *Boomtown*'s spatial construction of character. *Doctor Who* follows the adventures of a time travelling alien who battles evil villains and sets right all the moral decay he encounters across time and space: a swashbuckler for the sci-fi crowd. Like all time travelers, then, the Doctor is "unstuck" in time: that is, he moves through time like others move through space, both forwards and backwards. River Song, a sometimes companion of the Doctor, is also "unstuck" in time. She does not travel as frequently as the Doctor, but always somehow encounters him "out of order." Song first meets the Doctor sometime in his future, but last sees him during her first appearance on the show (she dies when the audience first meets her; in her next appearance, then, she is much healthier).

The two characters meet half a dozen times, but for each of them the meeting takes place at a different point in their relationship. Each time they meet, they have to compare notes to figure out how they know each other. In the episode "The Impossible Astronaut," for example,

the Doctor meets Song in a diner and they determine their temporal relationship, as effects come before causes:

The Doctor: ...What trouble have you got for me this time? [she smacks him] Okay. I'm assuming that's for something I haven't done yet.

Song: Yes it is.

The Doctor: Good. Looking forward to it. (Moffat 2011)

As in any form of electronic mediation, this form of asynchronous communication results in a more nuanced relationship between participations (Meyrowitz, 1984, p. 38). Indeed, like the Doctor and River Song, we constantly interact online in different timeframes. It may not be as explicit as that between life and death, and we may not be travelling backwards in time, but we do situate ourselves within the temporal frame of our friends and connections online. To “see” multiple timeframes at the same time allows multiple viewpoints to come together. Just as personified in *Boomtown*, here such networking is made metaphorical through connections in time.

There is a similar “networkization” of character, time, and narrative in *Flashforward* (2009), which presents a sprawling cast of characters connected via six degrees of separation in both the past and the future, and whose connections drive the plot forward. In *Flashforward*, everyone on Earth blacks out simultaneously for 137 seconds. During this period of stupor, the population of the planet “flashes forward” and experiences 137 seconds of their life six months in the future. Upon awakening, each person remembers his/her future, or at least their experience of that future, and then tries to understand it. Some characters are pregnant, some are being held captive, some are drunk, and others are engaged in illegal or illicit activities. The few that didn’t “flashforward” believe that their lack of vision signals their imminent death. Yet, as the six-

month window closes, characters' realities change noticeably from what their vision indicated. For example, FBI agent Marshall Vogel dies before his flashforward comes "true," illustrating the unpredictability of the future. The development of the narrative towards (the inevitable) moment represented in the characters' flashforwards creates an infinite number of possible narratives, as each character's flashforward becomes a point of reference for a number of "possible worlds"—each narrative thread both existing (in flashforward form) and not existing (because it could be changed) at the same time.

The show illustrates the social networking mode by focusing both on the narratives of the future and the narratives of the present. Both narratives take place at the same "time" on screen. In each episode, a character's flashforward might be expanded, allowing the audience to see more of the future. The "story" of *Flashforward* takes place between the characters' possible futures and the current investigation of that future. Take, for example, the character Olivia Benford, who flashes forward and sees herself talking intimately to an unfamiliar man. When she later glimpses that man in a hospital hallway, she both knows and does not know him—she knows that they will one day know each other, but she does not yet know him. The audience must keep character traits, time frames, and dual narratives in mind simultaneously in order to piece together the show's overarching narrative. Similarly, Olivia's husband Mark Benford illustrates a shift in the characterization of memory. Mark's flashforward takes him to a future in which he is drunk and hallucinatory. Unable to piece together his experiences, Mark's vision of himself drinking undermines his resolution to remain sober. Because his memory of a possible future is also affected by that future drunkenness, the images in his flashforward become unreliable and untrustworthy. Much as with Olivia's vision, the audience of *Flashforward* has to sort through aspects of a future that might or might not be "true" (i.e., that actually happen in that

future) or can contain aspects that are “false” (i.e., that are manifestations of a drunken vision). Mark must question his own past memory of this future event. Clarifying the reliability of a character’s subjective vision necessarily involves intense attention to detail and a powerful understanding of narrative complexity—skills, I argue, that are symbolized by today’s digital culture.

Using the social network mode to analyze television, to concentrate less on whether or not the events envisioned by the characters of *Flashforward* come true and more on how that understanding affects the characters themselves, refocuses the audience’s attention textually. But perhaps more importantly, it also comments on the establishment of veracity and truthfulness on social network sites as well. For example, one of the many online discussion boards for *Flashforward* features detailed analyses of character motivations, debates between truth and history, and characterizations.⁹ Watching *Flashforward* may offer more than just adventure and temporal dynamics: by viewing how characters understand the “truth” of what each of them say, audiences may become more attuned to viewing different versions of events online, what Bruns (2008) describes as the different “representations of truth” that exist in social media. By piecing together characterizations scattered across both narrative time and narrative space, viewers learn the skills necessary for cross-referencing, fact-checking, and ethos-establishing in online environments.

Ultimately, what the social network mode most saliently engenders in television criticism is the ability to see the fictional characters with the same “social network” framework through which individual audiences members also connect with each other. Viewers seem to have the feeling of watching a fictionalized network personified. This is not to say that viewers might literally see themselves in contact with characters, but rather that, as the television critic, the

social network offers a clear heuristic with which to help structure an analysis of the relationship between characters. The power of this metaphor stems from the digital creativity and amateur production the social network facilitates (Gauntlett, 2011). The members of our network—no matter how tenuously linked in the “real world”—serve to situate our own online identity. Like people on an online social network with whom we have few connections but from whom we draw identifiable characters, so too can television characters inspire or engender identification.

And this is what I think is most valuable about the social network mode— the ability to visualize the complex interactions between character and audience member. Although I’ve pointed out some of the textual similarities between online social networks and television character relationships, more empirical, ethnographic, and sociological research would help expand on these crucial connections. To see television characters, then, as a part of our own network means that they become part of our lives; and offers television critics the structures through which to see these connections.

Implications for the Social Network Mode within Television Scholarship

Using criticism based on social networks offers a useful mode of analysis that can change the focus of television criticism by offering new inroads into analyses of character as representative of narrative. Examining the temporal discontinuity engendered by the network can reveal issues of identity and characterization on television. One way it does this is through the identification we feel towards media characters. As Allen (1992) points out, television more closely resembles the ‘I/you relationship of face-to-face communication more than the removed and mediated ‘writer/reader’ relationship of literary communication” (p. 101). As he explains, viewers can become more emotionally invested in the characters, following the people in stories,

rather than stories about people. Producers sometimes try to generate this connection by connecting audience to viewers metaphorically, as *Doctor Who* (2005) producer Phil Collinson describes: “give the audience a character who would be accessible, for the audience at home to really identify with them” (qtd. in Hall, 2010).

In the past decade, television content has changed to where more television narratives feature more characters in greater complexity: the “soap-opera-fication” of today’s television. We are becoming more familiar with multiple characters and networked storytelling simply because of its rapid diffusion across multiple television programs. But at the same time, we are also experiencing the same dynamic mode of social networking within our own lives. The vast array of characters that greet me on my Facebook homepage mirror the multitude of characters I imagine when I watch *Lost* or *Flashforward*. And I use the same networking logic to understand how one is connected to the other. By focusing on the “network” as a metaphor and as a symbol for 21st century life, we can see how television not only reflects back at us the experiences of our everyday life, but also help shape those experiences so that we can understand them. In the shift from a Web 1.0 world to a Web 2.0 world, we’ve seen increased attention in the way individuals are perceived to have power and activity in our culture (Beer & Burrows, 2007). Understanding television through the lens of the social network helps foster a greater understanding about our contemporary cultural moment, when digital technology has started to become ingrained in our lives. Therefore, it’s important to study the representation of television narrative and character through the lens of the network to examine not just what these representations reveal about our relationship with television, but also what they say about our digital society. The strength of the “new” web is its concentration on networks as structuring element. We live at a time when the social power of the network is only beginning to be actualized. As I was writing this, people in

the Middle East and North Africa mobilized through social media to seek political change.

Money was raised for numerous charities, political campaigns, and relief causes such as the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. Human social networks, enhanced by technology, are creating social change.

Ultimately, the power of the network as a series of relationships, as a space, and as a metaphor for understanding ourselves becomes apparent in the way that our everyday media reflect network characteristics. The complexity of television helps foster a deeper and more meaningful understanding of our culture. It's not that changes in television have led to a greater acceptance of networking in our own lives, but rather that by using the social network as a heuristic, the television critic can more effectively illustrate its reflection within our quotidian lives.

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Footnotes

¹ Barring any affiliate competition.

² The concept of the narrator is also important here. However, in television studies the “narrator” is often conflated with the subjective position of the addresser (see Allen, 1992; Kozloff 1992).

³ <http://boards.nbc.com/nbc/index.php?showtopic=848311>.

⁴ Other social network sites have recently been created that play on our real-world connections to media: the site GetGlue, for instance, asks users to share with other users what they’re being entertained by.

⁵ <http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Vincent>.

⁶ http://lostpedia.wikia.com/wiki/Character_connections.

⁷ This is not unproblematic, as detailed in Askwith (2009, p. 165): many fans hated the characters and the change they created for the backstory.

⁸ www.failbook.com.

⁹ <http://boards.straightdope.com/sdmb/showthread.php?t=564873>.