

DOCUMENT SUMMARY

This document is the foundational 1956 academic article by Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl that introduces the concepts of "**para-social relationship**" and "**para-social interaction**." The authors analyze how the new mass media (radio and television) create an illusion of a face-to-face, intimate relationship between performers (who they term "**personae**") and their audiences. The paper deconstructs the techniques used to foster this one-sided intimacy and explores the psychological roles and functions this relationship serves for the audience, particularly for the socially isolated.

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- **Related Docs:** This paper is the foundational source for the concepts of **Parasocial Relationships** and **Interaction** discussed in "The Architecture of Narrative Influence."

FORMATTED CONTENT

Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance

Donald Horton & R. Richard Wohl

One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media - radio, television, and the movies - is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met as if they were in the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a **para-social relationship**.

In television, especially, the image which is presented makes available nuances of appearance and gesture to which ordinary social perception is attentive and to which interaction is cued. Sometimes the 'actor' – whether he is playing himself or performing in a fictional role - is seen engaged with others; but often he faces the spectator, uses the mode of direct address, talks as if he were conversing personally and privately. The audience, for its part, responds with something more than mere running observation; it is, as it were, subtly insinuated into the program's action and internal social relationships

and, by dint of this kind of staging, is ambiguously transformed into a group which observes and participates in the show by turns. The more the performer seems to adjust his performance to the supposed response of the audience, the more the audience tends to make the response anticipated. This simulacrum of conversational give and take may be called **para-social interaction**.

Para-social relations may be governed by little or no sense of obligation, effort, or responsibility on the part of the spectator. He is free to withdraw at any moment. If he remains involved, these **para-social relations** provide a framework within which much may be added by fantasy. But these are differences of degree, not of kind, from what may be termed the **ortho-social**. The crucial difference in experience obviously lies in the lack of effective reciprocity, and this the audience cannot normally conceal from itself.

The interaction, characteristically, is one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development.

Of particular interest is the creation by these media of a new type of performer: quizmasters, announcers, "interviewers" in a new "show-business" world – in brief, a special category of "personalities" whose existence is a function of the media themselves. These "personalities," usually, are not prominent in any of the social spheres beyond the media. They exist for their audiences only in the **para-social relation**. Lacking an appropriate name for these performers, we shall call them **personae**.

The Role of the Persona

The **persona** is the typical and indigenous figure of the social scene presented by radio and television. To say that he is familiar and intimate is to use pale and feeble language for the pervasiveness and closeness with which multitudes feel his presence. The spectacular fact about such **personae** is that they can claim and achieve an intimacy with what are literally crowds of strangers, and this intimacy, even if it is an imitation and a shadow of what is ordinarily meant by that word, is extremely influential with, and satisfying for, the great numbers who willingly receive it and share in it.

The **persona** offers, above all, a continuing relationship. His appearance is a regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life. His devotees 'live with him' and share the small episodes of his public life – and to some extent even of his private life away from the show. In time, the devotee – the "fan" comes to believe that he "knows" the **persona** more intimately and profoundly than others do; that he "understands" his character and appreciates his values and motives.

The Bond of Intimacy

It is an unvarying characteristic of these "personality" programs that the greatest pains are taken by the **persona** to create an illusion of intimacy. We call it an illusion because

the relationship between the **persona** and any member of his audience is inevitably one-sided, and reciprocity between the two can only be suggested. There are several principal strategies for achieving this illusion of intimacy.

Most characteristic is the attempt of the **persona** to duplicate the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering. This accounts, in great measure, for the casualness with which even the formalities of program scheduling are treated. The spectator is encouraged to gain the impression that what is taking place on the program gains a momentum of its own in the very process of being enacted.

Then and later - I consciously tried to talk to the listener as an individual, to make each listener feel that he knew me and I knew him. It seemed to work pretty well then and later. I know that strangers often stop me on the street today, call me Dave and seem to feel that we are old friends who know all about each other. - Dave Garroway

The Role of the Audience

The general outlines of the appropriate audience role are perceived intuitively from familiarity with the common cultural patterns on which the role of the **persona** is constructed. These roles are chiefly derived from the primary relations of friendship and the family, characterized by intimacy, sympathy, and sociability. The audience is expected to accept the situation defined by the program format as credible, and to concede as "natural" the rules and conventions governing the actions performed and the values realized.

Values of the Para-Social Role for the Audience

What **para-social roles** are acceptable to the spectator and what benefits their enactment has for him would seem to be related to the systems of patterned roles and social situations in which he is involved in his everyday life.

The enacted role may be an idealized version of an everyday performance – a 'successful' **para-social** approximation of an ideal pattern, not often, perhaps never, achieved in real life. Here the contribution of the **persona** may be to hold up a magic mirror to his followers, playing his reciprocal part more skillfully and ideally than do the partners of the real world.

In addition to the possibilities we have already mentioned, the media present opportunities for the playing of roles to which the spectator has or feels he has – a legitimate claim, but for which he finds no opportunity in his social environment.

This function of the **para-social** then can properly be called compensatory, inasmuch as it provides the socially and psychologically isolated with a chance to enjoy the elixir of sociability.

Extreme Para-Sociability

For the great majority of the audience, the **para-social** is complementary to normal social life. It provides a social milieu in which the everyday assumptions and understandings of primary group interaction and sociability are demonstrated and reaffirmed. The "personality" program, however, is peculiarly favorable to the formation of compensatory attachments by the socially isolated, the socially inept, the aged and invalid, the timid and rejected.

It is only when the **para-social relationship** becomes a substitute for autonomous social participation, when it proceeds in absolute defiance of objective reality, that it can be regarded as pathological.

The Image as Artifact

The encouragement of, not to say demand for, a sense of intimacy with the **persona** and an appreciation of him as a "real" person is in contradiction to the fact that the image he presents is to some extent a construct a facade - which bears little resemblance to his private character. The standard technique is not to make the private life an absolute secret... but to create an acceptable facade of private life as well, a more or less contrived private image of the life behind the contrived public image.

Public preoccupation with the private lives of stars and **personae** is not self-explanatory... we would emphasize... the confirmation and enrichment of the **para-social relation** with them. It may be precisely because this is basically an illusion that such an effort is required to confirm it. It seems likely that those to whom **para-social relationships** are important must constantly strive to overcome the inherent limitations of these relationships, either by elaborating the image of the other, or by attempting to transcend the illusion by making some kind of actual contact with him.

In essence, therefore, we would like to expand and capitalize on the truism that the **persona** and the "personality" programs are part of the lives of millions of people, by asking how both are assimilated, and by trying to discover what effects these responses have on the attitudes and actions of the audiences who are so devoted to and absorbed in this side of American culture.