The Double Bind of Authenticity: Humour, Trust and Celebrity

The authentic self, marketed

* Humour and trust
  + Using humour to manage and create social bonds
    - Success of humour depends on trust
    - Willingness of audience to affiliate
  + Humour used to build trust
    - Affiliation and disaffiliation
      * Presenting membership, taking on commitments of membership
* To the extent that humour relies on personal connection, and judgements on what sort of person the humourist is, perceptions of authenticity are important
  + This is true not just for celebrity humourists, but advertisers that make use of humour too.
  + These capture cases where it is important that the audience want to conceive of themselves
* Two sorts of affiliation: equal and hierarchical
  + On hierarchical affiliation, humourist doesn’t laugh

Trust and parasocial relationships?

Celebrity provides false uncertainty reduction. Repeated engagement with presented media image but media image is controlled and may variously depart from actual person.

Is relationship with image directly?

Trusting the celebrity?

* There is celebrity that requires parasocialilty to function. This is to say that for the celebrity to work for the celebrated persona (say to generate income or reputation), the audience must relate to them parasocially.
  1. Humour can help parasociality but also:
  2. Performed humour requires a sort of parasociality to work
* Double bind of authenticity:
  1. Audience wants to see celebrity as unmediated, genuine
  2. Audience expects category-typical features of celebrity
* Humour manages and creates social bonds
* There is a sort of celebrity that requires parasocial bonds
* Bi-directional relationship between celebrity and humour
* Celebrity engenders false trust

Build to: double bind of authenticity

Support with:

1. Some celebrity is based off of parasocial relationships
   1. This requires “intimate, friend-like” attitude towards a “mediated persona.”
   2. Attraction grows over time as trust increases
   3. Trust is built through self-disclosure
      1. ‘putting yourself out there’
2. Humour and trust
   1. Humour may depend on trust but also
   2. Humour can be used to build trust
      1. Affiliative and disaffiliative humour, us and them
   3. Humour as a social phenomenon means understanding humour as an interaction
      1. Participating with celebrity
   4. Intimacy of humour
      1. Shared emotional experience as self-disclosure
3. The persona of the celebrity-humourist is important
   1. Audience must be willing to participate affiliatively
   2. Humour as self-disclosure builds personage
4. Double bind of authenticity
   1. Audience wants the authentic celebrity
      1. They are trusting that the celebrity is a certain persona
      2. Trust has been garnered on the basis of the celebrity being that persona
      3. Best way to garner trust is to earn it, otherwise manipulation
   2. Audience expects celebrity to present category-typical features
      1. Acceptance as authentic depends upon presenting as audience expects
         1. Which, of course, is a strong pressure towards not meeting the first disjunct.
5. Implications of double bind
   1. Mass media generates (para)social demands it cannot satisfy

The Double Bind of Authenticity: Humour, Trust and Celebrity

Celebrities are nothing without an audience. It is the attention and devotion of this audience — their fans — that generates the celebrity. This attention and devotion may be understood as a parasocial relationship (Horton and Wohl, 1956). Such relationships are characterized as intimate and friend-like attitudes directed from an audience towards the celebrity (Rubin and McHugh, 1987). Since celebrity depends on such parasocial relationships, celebrity personas are crafted to foster and encourage such parasocial interaction. In this paper I engage humour and trust as part of the process of fostering parasocial relationships, and argue that celebrities face what I call the double bind of authenticity.

The double bind of authenticity may be characterized as follows. To foster parasocial relationships, it is important the celebrities be seen as authentic. This places two demands upon the celebrity. The first is that there is a pressure for the celebrity to be themselves, however that is understood. This is part of a process of garnering the audience’s trust. The audience trusts that the celebrity is a certain “persona”—has certain character traits and dispositions—and this places the demand that the celebrity present themselves as they really are (Horton and Wohl, 1956). The second is that the audience may have expectations that the celebrity act in certain category-typical ways. This places the demand that the celebrity present a persona that conforms to audience expectations. This paper will use philosophical literature on humour and trust to explicate this analysis of the double bind, and support the conclusion that media celebrity regularly creates unsatisfiable demands upon the celebrity.

This paper contains four sections. The first section presents an analysis of celebrity in terms of parasocial relationships. This analysis uses work in the sociology of media to argue that parasocial relationships require the attitude of trust, from the audience and directed towards the celebrity. The second section combines the analysis of trust with an analysis of humour. I approach humour as a social phenomenon, which is involved in creating and maintaining social groups. I show that there is humour that depends on trust for its success, and also humour which can be used to build trust. This is used to support the argument that humour may be a crucial ingredient in building a fanbase to sustain a celebrity. In the third section, I combine the analyses from the first two sections to underline the importance of the celebrity’s persona. The persona is not only what the audience directs their parasocial interactions towards, it may also determine the success or failure of the fandom-sustaining humour. Consequently, the persona the humour constructs is essential to the persistence of the celebrity. In the fourth and final section, I offer my account of the double bind of authenticity.

Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl. 1956. “Mass Communication and Parasocial-Interactios: Observations on Intimacy at a distance.” *Interpersonal and Biological Processes* 19/3. 215-229.

Rebecca B. Rubin and Michael P. McHugh. 1987. “Development of Parasocial Interaction Relationships.” *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 31/3. 279-292.