

Uhh Yeah Dude and the Interpretive Communities of Podcasts

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Abstract

Due to the high level of user activity required by podcasts (downloading, self-selected programming) there exists a strong potential for shared understanding and the construction of an interpretive community based around the program. The podcast Uhh Yeah Dude is examined through the Reader Response Theory of literary analysis to better understand the show's ability to create new meaning from existing media texts as well as its ability to solidify an interpretive community based around the show's interpretive strategies.

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Today's audience is way better trained... A dog, if you point at something, will look only at your finger. – David Foster Wallace

In an article in *Vanity Fair* on September 18, 2001, editor Graydon Carter famously declared, “I think it’s the end of the age of irony” (Hirschorn 2011). Only one week after 9/11, this may have felt like an insightful observation. However, Carter may have jumped the gun on his call for a new epoch in American life. With the subsequent entrance into two theaters of war and the slow sliding slump that is the American economy, irony has not only survived, but flourished in a new form that seems to be less detached and cynical than its pre-9/11 counterpart.

It is within this new post-9/11, post-irony, post-postmodern paradigm that the podcast *Uhh Yeah Dude* began as a forum for “Two American Americans” to address the current state of events and pop culture in the US. The show acts as a lens through which listeners can view American pop culture, but without the detached irony of a cynic. The show encourages listeners to fully embrace and engage all of the good and the bad in pop culture in order to acquire a better understanding of where we are as a society. The show functions as a text that requires the reader (listener) to negotiate between their own position with regard to pop culture and that of the author (hosts).

In order to better understand the process by which *Uhh Yeah Dude* engages its listeners in a discussion and dissection of American pop culture, I will explore the Reader Response Theory of literary analysis and the way in which meaning is produced by the

negotiation between the reader and the text. In particular, I will be looking at Wolfgang Iser's concept of the Implied Reader with regard to Uhh Yeah Dude. In addition, I will apply Stanley Fish's concept of interpretive communities to Uhh Yeah Dude and show that the podcast actively produces and reinforces an interpretive community that interacts with popular culture through the lens of Uhh Yeah Dude. Using both the concepts of the Implied Reader and Interpretive Communities, I will show how Uhh Yeah Dude creates meaning in media programming that demonstrates Reader Response Theory in action and possibly points towards a new understanding of the medium of podcasting and its uses.

History of Podcasts

Podcasts come in both audio and video file formats, and are downloaded via the Internet to a computer or portable media device, such as an iPod (Harris & Park, 2008; Potter, 2006; Van Orden, 2005a, 2005b). Users are then able to enjoy the content at their leisure, much like digital video recorders allow television viewers to watch content whenever they wish. In addition to this time-shifting effect, because podcasts can be stored on portable devices, they also offer a location-shifting effect where the user can listen to the podcast as they physically move around (McClung & Johnson, 2010). This time-shifting effect and portability seems to lends itself to favoring audio-only podcasts, as it would seem quite difficult to move through the world while watching a video screen. Cochrane (2004) describes podcasts as "Walkaway Content" because of their portability and reliance on listener control.

Podcasts, as they exist today, were developed in 2004 by Mark Curry in response to his frustration with the process of manually downloading audio files from the Internet. Curry adopted the Really Simple Syndication (RSS) technology in order to automate the process. Curry developed a program that used RSS feeds to automatically download mp3 audio files to his computer, in the same manner that RSS technology can deliver blog content (Goldberg, 2004). Other software developers followed suit and many new podcast directories, such as Podtastic, Podomatic and Podcast Alley, were established as aggregators for audio mp3 files (Affleck, 2005). Today, Apple's iTunes Store is considered the largest podcast directory available and features over 100,000 individual podcasts with the number of individual episodes being in the millions (Van Orden, 2007).

Uhh Yeah Dude

Uhh Yeah Dude (UYD) is a weekly comedy podcast that focuses on pop culture and American life. The show is hosted by Jonathan Laroquette and Seth Romatelli, two men that live in Los Angeles. The show's motto, "America Through the Eyes of Two American Americans" points to the show's comic sensibilities when it comes to addressing the topics at hand. The use of the term "American Americans" is a comic jab at both right-wing patriotism as well as left-wing political correctness. Jonathan and Seth take the listener through a round up of the current happenings in pop culture and discuss each topic from the perspective of wide-eyed anthropologists observing a foreign culture.

The podcast medium, in which the show is presented, allows for a great deal of intimacy to be established between the listener and the hosts, and this same intimacy is

expressed through the hosts' connection with their community of listeners. Jonathan gives his cell phone number out during every show, and listeners are encouraged to call or text. In addition, Seth gives out a voicemail number where listeners can call in and leave messages about the show or whatever they like.

The basic structure of Uhh Yeah Dude is conversational in nature, with one of the hosts bringing up a topic and the conversation flowing from whatever that topic may be. The two hosts negotiate the topics at hand from multiple perspectives at once. At the same time, they act as if they were two foreigners observing American pop culture for the first time as well as being intimately familiar with it. The show's humor can take the form of irony, sarcasm and sincerity, almost all at the same time, to create a new context for the topics being discussed that reveals them as humorous and endearing to the listener. UYD has a large community of listeners and has performed live versions of the show in front of audiences in Los Angeles, New York and Seattle. With such a large and dedicated fan-base, the show can make use of inside jokes and references without fear that perhaps the majority of the listeners will understand. Due to the high level of user activity that is required to listen to podcasts (they must be manually downloaded, unlike broadcast media) the hosts can take greater liberties with these inside references because it could be assumed that the listener is in on the joke.

Reader Response Theory

According to the Reader Response Theory of literary criticism, the meaning of a text is not simply embedded into it by its author, but rather emerges as a function of the reader engaging with the text. The author of any text imbues the work with the culture values that they are surrounded by and ascribe to, and the viewer then derives meaning from the text within the cultural framework in which they are currently surrounded. Reader Response criticism could be said to have begun with I.A Richard's essay on the emotional response of readers, as well as the work of D.W. Harding and Louise Rosenblatt in the 1930's (Tompkins 1980). However, the theory became more well defined with further notions of a *mock reader* (Gibson 1950), the introduction of the *narrate* in the literary process (Prince 1973) and the concept of an author/reader engagement that focuses on the passive reader absorbing information directly from the author (Poulet 1972). However, it was Wolfgang Iser's book, "The Act of Reading" that developed a theoretical framework for the reading process based on an active reader, the text and the interaction that occurs between them (Iser 1978).

Iser describes the relationship between the reader and the text as consisting of two poles, "the artistic and the aesthetic: the artistic pole is the author's text and the aesthetic is the realization accomplished by the reader" (p. 21). Here, the aesthetic object is not simply the text or the singular experience of the reader, but rather the text provides a "set of instructions" from which the reader may then base their response (p. xi) and it is the "interaction between the textual signals and the reader's acts of comprehension" (p. 9) where true meaning can be found. The "instructions" provided by the text are not

complete, however, and it is within these “blanks” that the interaction of the reader comes into play, filling the gaps of meaning left by the text.

The Implied Reader. According to Iser, the reader of a literary text can assume many different narrative perspectives based on the focus of the story, different characters viewpoints or that of the fictitious reader, who embodies “specific historical views and perspectives” (p. 18) as directed by the author. During these changes in narrative perspective, the reader must fill in the blanks of instructions given by the text (Davis 1989). The text then becomes an experience for the reader in which a wandering viewpoint establishes different “horizons” of expectation to be fulfilled and the aesthetic object is continually “structured and restructured” (Iser p. 111-12). Iser refers to this traveling through the text as the domain of the “implied reader,” or the idealized persona that “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect” (p. 34). The actual reader can never experience the world exactly as the text envisions it, and why would they want to read the work if they did? The idea of the implied reader can be viewed as the author inviting the reader to actively engage with the text and fill in the “blanks” that are created in the reading process (Davis 1989).

Although Iser developed his concepts of Reader Response in relation to printed literary texts, the foundations of it have been used to explore other forms of electronic media texts such as film (Maland 1988) and television in the case of Stuart Hall’s theory of Encoding/Decoding (Hall 1972). When applied to an audio podcast, such as Uhh Yeah Dude, Iser’s concept of the Implied Reader takes on new connotations.

The Implied Reader in Uhh Yeah Dude

It is interesting to consider Iser's framework for Reader Response theory in regards to the podcast Uhh Yeah Dude, because Iser's discussion of the negotiation of reader and text occur within the paradigm of fictional literature. When applied to Uhh Yeah Dude, which could be described as a non-fiction podcast, Iser's theory takes on some interesting connotations. If the two hosts are to be considered the authors of the text and pop culture is the subject matter that the authors use to create the text, then the Implied Reader is charged with the task of negotiating between their own notions of the topic and that being relayed by the author through the text. The listener is constantly negotiating between what they already understand to be a part of pop culture and the reinterpretation that they are experiencing through the text. This is interesting because the text presupposes that the listener is engaged with current events and pop culture and will understand the references being made through the text. According to Iser, "the literary text performs its function, not thorough a ruinous comparison with reality, but by communicating a reality which it has organized itself" (p. 181), here we can see that the text is acting more as a reorganization of reality that presents itself to the reader. Using Iser's theory, this "reorganized reality" that is presented to the Implied Reader in Uhh Yeah Dude, implies that the text is actively altering the comprehension of the reader. For this to be true, the text needs to retain some power of its own, some inherent meaning. This idea of the text having an inherent meaning is something that is strongly contested by Stanley Fish.

Stanley Fish and Interpretive Communities

In order to account for similar interpretations of the same text, as well as differing interpretations of the same text or multiple interpretations of the same text at different times, Stanley Fish proposed the notion of what he calls *interpretive communities* (Fish 1980). According to Fish, interpretive communities are, “made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading (in the conventional sense) but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (p. 171). Fish is saying that the interpretive strategies employed by any specific group exist prior to the act of reading. Different communities, therefore, will apply their own interpretive strategy and see other communities as not understanding “the true text” (Fish p. 171). The point Fish is making here is that there is no “true text” and that the text is only created when the reader engages it with. It is important to note that these interpretive communities are not stable, however, and can easily shift with time and new understandings.

One thing that Fish does not take into consideration is that some interpretive strategies can be self-selected versus completely culturally constructed, as he argues. For example, any kind of political ideology (Marxism, Feminism, Environmentalism) that could be said to be part of an individual’s interpretive strategy would be self-selected. It would seem that no one is born with any given political ideology as a belief system or lens through which they view the world, rather these are learned behaviors that individuals select on their own, whether in agreement with or opposition to the dominant ideology of their given culture. Erie Martha Roberts addresses this in her essay, *Something Fish Going On* by noting the difference between self-selecting and situational

interpretive communities. It should be important to consider that no matter the definition of interpretive community that is used, these communities consist of individuals and the strategies that they employ are implemented with the agency of said individual. If we are to view interpretation in the way that Fish presents it, the interpretive community functions within a top-down power structure that leaves no room for dissent or innovation from individuals (Roberts 2006).

So it is within this new concept of self-selected interpretive communities that the podcast Uhh Yeah Dude functions to bring meaning to media texts that could otherwise be outside the boundaries of acceptability for certain interpretive strategies.

The Interpretive Community of Uhh Yeah Dude

David Foster Wallace points out in his essay “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” that in order to alleviate the tension between television’s ideal image of beautiful people enjoying themselves and that of the lone, and potentially lonely viewer, a detached ironic viewpoint gives some power back to the audience. It allows the viewer to feel smarter than the text, and in turn this act then becomes the entertainment in and of itself; laughing at the text, instead of with it (Foster-Wallace 1993). If we take Foster-Wallace’s assumptions about television and apply them to include other forms of mass media and pop culture, it can help to explain why Reader Response Theory and the idea of Interpretive Communities, when applied to Uhh Yeah Dude, can reveal what makes the show so interesting in its content.

Uhh Yeah Dude acts as a guide or lens through which to view mass media and pop culture. The hosts seem to be proposing that the listeners dive head first into the mire of pop culture in order to get a better understanding of how it is shaping our world. In this sense, the text functions more as a critical analysis of contemporary pop culture, rather than degenerating into the sarcastic and snarky holy-than-thou commentary that proliferates in media commentary today.

According to Stanley Fish, interpretive communities are incredibly hard to define and pin down because they are no more stable in their meanings than the texts that they seek to interpret (Fish 1980). It is because the nature of these communities is not natural or universal, but learned that makes them difficult to identify. Also, because the interpretive strategies of each community are learned, they can (and do) shift and change with time. However, taking Roberts' (2006) suggestion of the notion of self-selecting interpretive communities, we can get a clearer picture of what an interpretive community may look like in relation to Uhh Yeah Dude.

Uhh Yeah Dude makes use of many different types of media texts throughout the course of the show (television shows, medical research studies, news stories) and applies a unique comedic spin on each topic to pull out the absurdity in each one. If we are to believe the position that Reader Response Theory posits, then it would stand to reason that meaning is not held in each of the original texts being presented during the course of the podcast, but comes about when listeners engage with the hosts of the show and apply the learned interpretive strategies of the Uhh Yeah Dude community to each of the presented topics.

One of the more frequent areas covered by the show is the reading of postings from the online, classified ad website Craigslist. Frequently, the hosts will read postings from the Casual Encounters or Missed Connection section of the site, which function as informal personal ads or dating services. The humor is derived from the shared interpretation of these postings as a reflection on modern society and technology. Reading from a Craigslist posting in episode 116 that says, “Sunday night, Barnes & Noble in Sherman Oaks. I asked you something on the way out of the store; you ignored me. Is it too late?” (Romatelli 2008), the hosts begin riffing on this notion of the desperation and loneliness that seems to be a by-product of modern Internet technology. Despite the massive amount of connectivity that has been brought about by modern technology, there also seems to be a lack of interpersonal, face-to-face connection. Uhh Yeah Due is identifying this duality that exists by simply reappropriating the text of the Craigslist posting within the context of the podcast (the irony, of course, is that the medium by which the show is distributed is highly individualistic and based on the Internet). Uhh Yeah Dude has generated a meaning and new interpretation of the original text and offered it up to the interpretive community that exists around the show.

Another media text that is consistent fodder for the show is the release of new products. Frequently, Jonathan and Seth will read from press releases distributed by major corporations about the launch of a new product. From episode 316, a press release from Campbell’s soup reads, “This summer, Campbell’s Soup will launch a premium line of soups called Go Soup. It will come in an edgy, graphically intense pouch. There will be informal messages on the packaging. The trendy flavors include Coconut Curry with

Chicken and Shitake Mushrooms. That pouch will read, ‘Shitake happens, but this soup is ready to eat.’” (Romatelli 2012). Again, the original text is being reappropriated by the hosts of the show and examined using an interpretive strategy that points to both recognition of the absurdity of modern advertisers in their attempt to capture the attention of young consumers, as well as a condemnation of the gross consumerism that dominates our media landscape.

Conclusion

While interpretive communities are ultimately theoretical in nature and difficult to clearly define, it seems that by applying a Reader Response analysis to a podcast such as Uhh Yeah Dude, perhaps this abstract concept can come into focus. By interpreting and repurposing media texts in such a way as to create a new shared meaning, Uhh Yeah Dude works to solidify and reaffirm the interpretive community that surrounds it. The show’s online message board is filled with comments from listeners using the interpretive strategy developed by the show and applying it to many other facets of popular culture. Here, the interpretive community takes the shape of comments and questions being delivered with the shared understanding that comes from the employment of similar interpretive strategies.

As the amount of media content available increases exponentially due to the increased connectivity of the Internet, it can become easy to be overwhelmed. What Uhh Yeah Dude does is offer a curated look at this massive amount of content in an hour-long show that encourages the listener to view the world through the lens of an interpretive

community that gives new meaning to media texts through parody, irony and reappropriation.

Further research could address the effects that different mediums have on the shape and structure of interpretive communities. While a podcast is highly user intensive, other mediums like television or terrestrial radio are not, and the relationship between the text and reader seems more distant, possibly allowing for a wider range of interpretations and a more fragmented interpretive community.

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