

HEALTH EDUCATION BY MEANS OF FICTIONAL STORIES

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Abstract: *Today's US and Western Europe TV series and film features are getting increasingly crammed with health-driven sub-plots and narratives. A number of studies indicate that some TV series' attention is almost equally divided between describing fictional heroes' lives and their medical experience, the latter being a clear educational vehicle. In our contribution we are going to discuss the case study of one of the most appreciated examples of such an approach, the ever growingly popular TV series Grey's Anatomy that - when usually attributed as a romantic/medical drama with small and specific comedy inserts - became a popular culture phenomenon and a regular prime-time broadcast since its 2005 premiere. This media product can be considered a striking example of spontaneous social and emotional learning right in the front of a TV-screen and the series is even more interesting because of a simple fact it favours the visualization of professional physicians' experience instead of focusing on more traditional patients' sub-plots.*

Keywords: *health, fictional character, stories, experiential learning*

Today's US and Western Europe TV series and film features are getting increasingly crammed with health-driven plots. They are specific by their definite orientation to the health education. By means of the stories of the fictional characters the viewer gains experience with the topic of health. This TV entertaining series brings about a great potential to communicate various educating messages to its viewers without them realizing that they have been actually formed and that they learn new information. This is the way how to prevent their possible refusal or any similar educational influences. The TV series with medical plots usually evenly focus on the life of the main characters and on medical situations. The TV series Grey's Anatomy will serve as the example for explaining the course of the socio-emotional learning. *Grey's Anatomy* ranks among romantic dramas with elements of comedy where the topic of life of main characters – doctors is given preference as compared with episodic characters of the patients. This rather non-traditional TV series from the medical environment with elements of peculiar humour has become a cultural phenomenon since its first show in 2005 and it keeps its ratings in the United States around 20 million of viewers per each episode. Also, it has a reserved place in the prime time.

The educational messages associated with the topic of health have become a common part of popular series – according to the research of the Kaiser Family Foundation from 09/2008 (Murphy et al., 2008) it is approximately 1.5 of the plot per each episode that is somehow related to the topic of health¹), and the biggest amount of such educational content is naturally offered by the medical TV series. According to the findings of the Kaiser Family Foundation, about a half of all stories related to the topic of health takes place in medical institutions, which offers a more complex view of the health topic to the viewer. Most of the shown medical care is considered reasonable in those stories. What predominates is the positive depiction of the interaction between the patient and the doctor. Only 1 % of the stories with health topics showed purely negative depiction of the interaction and provided health care (Murphy et al., 2008, pg. 13). The organizations like Kaiser Family Foundation focus on methods of mediating the health enlightenment to the viewers by means of the media. In such case it is not unusual that authors of the TV series often consult the educational messages and their incorporation in the episodes with such specialists.

The interiorization of the situation that is pedagogically important is supported by the following combination of influences: strong emotional captivation by the story that mediates the information; the viewers consider the story real or find some similarities with another concrete situation; the information is mediated by their favourite or important character; the moment of conveying of the information has a fundamental significance for further development of the conveying character; the conveyed information is mediated by a famous actor (compare Rideout, 2008, pg. 9).

Educational Messages and the Topic of Health in Grey's Anatomy

According to the findings of the Kaiser Family Foundation (Rideout, 2008, pg. 5), 45 % of regular viewers of the *Grey's Anatomy* say that thanks to the show they learned something new about the health care and 17 % of the viewers look up the information of the concrete health issue on grounds of the stories. 30 % of the viewers often discuss the episodes with their friends or family and even more viewers do it on the internet as part of the blogs, special web sites or discussion forums where various medical issues from previous episodes are discussed (compare Rideout, 2008, pg. 8). A correct educational message and correct popular show may be powerful communication channels (2008, s. 9). Another interpretation of the condition of shown topics related with health may be variously understood. For instance, 33 % of the analyzed episodes contained alcohol consumption, 6 % the problem of alcohol abuse, which may be considered insufficient or adequate in relation to the ratio between common occasional consumers and alcoholics in the society (Murphy et al., 2008, pg. 13).

¹ The top 10 programmes broadcasted in the prime time from 2004 – 2006 were analyzed, including Friends, ER, CSI, Will & Grace, CSI: Miami, Without a Trace, Law & Order, The Simpsons, 24, House, Desperate Housewives, Grey's Anatomy, All of Us, Lost, Bones etc. In total, 515 episodes of those shows were analyzed in which 792 health-related stories were identified (socially pathologic topics as the suicide, rape etc were not included among the health-related topics), i.e. 1.5 of health-related stories per an episode of some of the most popular shows that were on in the prime time. See <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/7764.pdf>

The TV series from medical environment usually divide their focus evenly between the life of their main characters and the medical situations. *Grey's Anatomy* ranks among romantic dramas with elements of comedy where the topic of life of main characters – doctors is given preference as compared with episodic characters of the patients. This rather non-traditional TV series from the medical environment with elements of peculiar humour has become a cultural phenomenon since its first show in 2005 and it keeps its ratings in the United States around 20 million of viewers per each episode. Also, it has a reserved place in the prime time. It is similarly popular in the whole western world. In the Czech environment it enjoys a bit lower popularity (in 2006 – 2008 it was about 423 – 562 thousand of viewers per an episode, whereas Dr. House shows the ratings of up to 1 million of viewers) as well as less attractive time but it in no way discourages its fans who in the USA almost immediately get the previous episodes so that they could discuss the plot, or purchase it on DVD as a whole series. Since 2005, the series has been regularly nominated or awarded the Golden Globe or EMMY awards in the category of best TV programmes. The number of characters offers many opportunities for viewer's self-identification with them since the plot is primarily focused on the characters' privacy. At the beginning it is the group of five residents who have just successfully finished their studies at the faculty of medicine and have entered the Seattle Grace hospital. Each of them represents a different type of man. They all however share the dream of one of the legendary surgeons of whom they had read before. All of them spend most of their time in the hospital and offer a rather peculiar sense of humour just to hide their emotions provoked by various incentives.

Grey's Anatomy Reflections as Perceived by its Audience and Fans

When choosing the method, I started from the experience of authors of comparable studies and from the methodical trend in the sphere of fan studies. The traditional methods of social researches in forms of interviews of the target group are criticized for their inability to capture the experience of mediated lives (Alasuutari, 1999 In Harrington – Bielby, 2007), and within the context of the fan studies, current leading representatives of the subject field often mark them as incapable of giving the true picture of the certain obscurity of the fan's pleasures (Hills, 2002 In Harrington – Bielby, 2007). At present, the research in the sphere of fan studies inclines to the ethnographic studies that are considered the ideal method of studying the current reception of media.² The virtual ethnographic studies also allow for more effective combination of the methods: combination of observations (for instance fan fiction, fan websites, fan art), participating observations and interviews (discussion forums).

During the time of the research, I had known the respondents of this study for more than a year from the *Grey's Anatomy* discussion forum at the Czech-Slovak Film Database, which enabled long observation of the development of their identification

² The standard anthropological model of long-term work in the field represents main challenge for the fan studies – instead of anthropology, it is ethnography that currently undergoes a crisis, as mentioned by Harrington – Bielby (2007)

with individual characters and their relation to the series. Five of them were long interested in the possibility of taking part in the study as the respondents. After previous experience I decided for individual interviews carried out namely electronically, instead of group discussions. The responses of the respondents thus show great amount of openness. None of the approached fans joined at some domestic fan websites of the TV series was interested in collaboration.

At the beginning of watching *Grey's Anatomy*, the viewers either turned on the TV randomly or were attracted by the trailers or articles, reviews or comments. In case of the trailer or reading the related texts, they were mostly intuitively interested by the stylization, actors, music or atmosphere of the series that other viewers probably passed by without a notice. I assume that this captivation works purely subjectively on grounds of personal aesthetic preferences and socio-emotional experience of the persons. In this case study we do not hear about any fatefulness, i.e. the exact moment of the first meeting with the series as it is common with the fans of popular audiovisual culture. Nevertheless, they are faithful viewers (compare Reeves, 1996) whom the absence of fan expressions (compare Jenkins, 1992) does not prevent from further self-identification, experiential learning or entertainment and pleasure from the reception.

The viewers in my study consider the series as means for showing emotions and interpersonal relations, and they realize that for the reception of the series works as the means of actually experiencing the situations they would never experience. At the same time, they are critical to showing the hospital situations and medical cases. They assume that their pleasure from the reception is based on emotional and social experience which additionally enables their social and emotional learning by means of the self-identifying reception of such situations (the process of learning does not happen in case of such critical approach that prevents from viewer's self-identification with the situation of the fictional).

Self-identification with a Fictional Character as the Source of Social and Emotional Learning

The narrative scheme of the episodes mingles with Meredith's voice-over as the independent narration above the story without the person being in camera viewfinder. This voice-over is in form of her ideas or questions and it also works as a feedback to the presented story. At the beginning or at the end of the episode, Meredith introduces us with certain facts, true or moral values of the characters, relationships, friends, life or death. Namely thanks to the introspection, Meredith becomes the most easily self-identifiable character.

The self-identification with a character and its situation is based on comparison of oneself and similar experience that could be transferred to completely different situations with comparable contexts. In the self-identifying stage the loyal viewers and fans naturally and very often also deeply analyze their own situation and assess their decisions in light of the decisions of the fictional characters that appear in similar situations.

The deep comparison of the fictional character and its situation with one self work as the key parts of the social and emotional learning (Hughes, 2007). This learning

then leads to strengthening of competences demonstrated namely in the social sphere. The empathy with a character allows the viewer to obtain new experience with emotions that he or she would never experience or has never experienced in such intensity or that he or she experienced long before. The experience obtained by means of this form of experiential learning becomes new part of the constantly shaping personality of the viewer (compare Hughes, 2007). And they are even more strengthened by the following discussion of the topic with fellow viewers and friends regardless the way of communication (i.e. within the virtual groups on the internet or in real life).

Viewer's Deliberation in Less Known Areas

The final stage is the application when the viewer strives to use the experience obtained in the course of the self-identified reflection, self-reflection and possible following discussions to solve his or her own problems in ordinary life. Regardless whether the story gives them a “key” to solve their situation, they are enriched by this “identified reception”. In most of the cases they cannot simply imitate the behaviour of the character, but there is a certain shift and personal development when the viewer asks himself whether he would do the same or different, and analyzes the possibilities that he would not even take into account before.

Despite the viewers are capable of identified reception they still approach the series as the product of audiovisual culture that is fun to review critically. They can identify themselves with a character and at the same time see the script and author's intentions behind it. The critical point of view and understanding the world of fiction is part of their viewer's passion that the reception brings about. It is an ideal harmony of the critical point of view and identification with the fictional character when one part of the reception procedures does not disturb the other. The loyal fans of *Grey's Anatomy* mostly criticize what they do not know or what they cannot assess in their position (in this case it is the medical cases). On the other hand, they consider “real” those situations that they are capable of evaluating, in this case it is the nature of a character or their problems mostly consisting of interpersonal relations and communication.

Unfortunately, in case of the Czech and Slovak loyal viewers, we cannot confirm that *Grey's Anatomy* as a TV series from medical environment works as a sufficient enlightening tool in health questions despite the TV series attempts for it and its authors strive to present important health issues. The respondents take a too careful approach to the topic of health to fulfil the educative message of the TV series in terms of the health care. They more easily reach the experiential learning by self-identification with the character and define the competences in the personality, social, communication and emotional sphere. In this case the person feels safe because there are such aspects that he or she can evaluate and thus identify with them. From the point of view of the show it seems to be better not to attempt for simple educative lesson with which the viewer has problem to identify, but rather for presentation of truly working human characters. This finding cannot be considered a fundamental because the actual experiential learning by means of self-identification with a character is already a big enough contribution.

VÝCHOVA KE ZDRAVÍ PROSTŘEDNICTVÍM PŘÍBĚHŮ FIKČNÍCH POSTAV

Abstrakt: V současnosti se stále více setkáváme se zdravotními zápletkami v populárních filmech a seriálech západní produkce. Seriály z lékařského prostředí se obvykle zaměřují srovnatelnou měrou na život hlavních postav, jako na lékařské situace. Jedinec pak nabývá prostřednictvím těchto příběhů fikčních postav zkušenosti s tématem zdraví. Na příkladě fenoménu Grey's Anatomy si vysvětlíme průběh sociálního a emocionálního učení. Grey's Anatomy patří k romantickým dramatům s komediálními prvky, kde má téma života hlavních postav – lékařů přednost před epizodními postavami pacientů. Takto do jisté míry netradičně pojatý seriál se od počátku svého vysílání v roce 2005 stal kulturním fenoménem, který si ve Spojených státech udržuje sledovanost okolo 20 milionů diváků na každou epizodu a je vysílán v hlavním vysílacím čase. Televizní zábavní pořad v sobě nese velký potenciál přenášet na diváky výchovná poselství, aniž by si uvědomili, že jsou formováni, a že se učí novým poznatkům, čímž lze předejít jejich případnému odmítnutí jakýchkoli edukačních vlivů.

Klíčová slova: zdraví, fikční postava, příběhy, zkušenostní učení