

The World's Nicest Grown-Up: A Fantasy Theme Analysis of News Media Coverage of Fred Rogers

By Ronald Bishop

This article applies fantasy theme analysis (Bormann, 1972, 1976, 1982, 1983, 2000) to explain the rhetorical vision that emerges from newspaper and broadcast news coverage of American television personality Fred Rogers. For the past 3 decades, journalists have framed Rogers as a calming influence and treated him with deference and respect. Journalists have created a fantasy about Rogers that holds him up as the embodiment of television's potential, potential that can be realized only by returning to the quiet tolerance and the power of imagination at the heart of Mister Rogers' Neighborhood. For reporters in this interpretive community, Rogers offers hope for those struggling to raise children. A rhetorical vision of Rogers as "the world's nicest grown-up," the "Dalai Lama of television," and "the Pied Piper of children's television" is constructed out of the fantasy themes by journalists stepping outside their usual role as objective observers. Journalists who start off skeptical of Rogers and his approach find themselves captivated by his message, and they insert this experience into their coverage of Rogers, making it a key fantasy theme.

Fred Rogers is one of the most revered figures in the history of U.S. television. His half-hour program, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, ran for PBS for more than 3 decades. His friendly, reassuring approach to teaching life's lessons has earned him generations of fans. Rogers is devoted to the idea that television can educate children through a mix of simple but profound storytelling and the encouragement of imagination.

This article applies fantasy theme analysis (Bormann, 1972, 1976, 1982, 1983, 2000) to explain the rhetorical vision that emerges from newspaper and broadcast news coverage of Rogers since *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* went on the air in the late 1960s. Reporters celebrate the virtues exemplified by Rogers—hard work,

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simplicity, and a strong belief in family values. The fantasy created by reporters tells us that there may still be a place for these virtues in children's television.

Background

Born Fred McFeeley Rogers in Latrobe, PA, in 1928, Rogers is an ordained Presbyterian minister as well as an accomplished songwriter and pianist. After graduating from Rollins College in Florida, he became fascinated with television. He took a job as a floor manager at NBC in New York (Millman, 1999), but Rogers was disillusioned with the new medium. "I got into television because I hated it so," he said in 1999. From his disappointment came ideas for tapping television's potential for educating children. "I thought there's some way of using this fabulous instrument to nurture those who would watch and listen," he said (Millman, 1999).

Rogers left New York and returned to Pittsburgh, where he created *The Children's Corner* for WQED-TV. In 1963, he developed a 15-minute version of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* for Canadian television (Moore, 1998, p. Y-6). A year later, Rogers again returned to Pittsburgh. He enrolled in child development courses; later, while producing *The Children's Corner*, he entered Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. In 1968, *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* began its successful run on National Educational Television (NET). The final original *Neighborhood* episode aired in September 2001. Rogers continues his work on behalf of children and families through his website and through occasional television specials.

Method and Theoretical Foundations

Four Lexis-Nexis searches were performed to obtain news stories and broadcast news transcripts about Rogers that were published or aired between January 1969 and February 2000. The principal investigator selected news and feature stories, editorials, reviews, and guest columns on Rogers and *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* for the analysis from U.S. newspapers with the highest circulation, the major broadcast networks, CNN, and online news services. In all, the search identified 87 newspaper stories, 3 guest columns, 1 editorial, 11 broadcast news transcripts, and 1 online story representing the work of 83 journalists from news organizations across the country.

With its roots in symbolic convergence theory (SCT), fantasy theme analysis enables researchers to explore the "shared worldview" (Foss, 1996) of a group of communicators. Rhetorical visions "structure our sense of reality in areas that we cannot experience directly but can only know by symbolic reproduction" (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 172). The key figure in fantasy theme analysis, Ernest Bormann, built his theory on Robert Bales's work on group communication. Bales found that groups fantasize and dramatize during communication. "Group fantasy events," as Bales called them, "chain out" through the group's members. As Bales noted, "A chain reaction of fantasy in the group is set up when one or some of the participants present in his communication symbols which have unconscious meanings for one

or some of the other participants" (1970, p. 138), even when, as here, the reporters who have covered Rogers since the late 1960s serve different audiences in different cities. Of particular relevance to this study is Bormann's claim that the study of "dramatizing moments" can be drawn from other types of communication, including mass communication. SCT springs from two assumptions: that communication creates reality, and that the meanings we hold for symbols can converge to create a shared reality (Foss, p. 122). When this happens, individuals "share a common consciousness and have the basis for communicating with one another to create community, to discuss their common experience, and to achieve mutual understanding" (Bormann, 1983, p. 104).

A fantasy theme is the means with which members of a group interpret events. From fantasies, members of a group craft "the most credible interpretation of experience or the most comprehensible forms for making sense out of experience" (Foss, p. 124). Fantasy themes "tell a story that accounts for the group's experience and that *is* the reality of the participants" (p. 123). For more than 3 decades, setting, character, and action fantasies at the heart of the rhetorical vision of Rogers have helped reporters understand changes in television and in its impact on families and children.

Setting

Journalists frame Rogers as an itinerant preacher, spreading the gospel of television's potential to millions of people around the world. As part of a 1987 journey to the former Soviet Union to appear on a children's television program (Brennan, Margulies, & Baker, 1988, p. 7-D; Allen, 1987, p. B-1; Barringer, 1987, p. 10), Rogers said he hoped to "build a little bridge on behalf of children" (Brennan, Margulies, & Baker, p. 7-D). Negotiations about his appearance stalled until Rogers turned for help to Daniel Striped Tiger, a puppet well known to *Neighborhood* viewers. "They just lit up," Rogers recalled about Daniel's greeting to the Soviet negotiators (Barringer, 1987, p. 10).

A key element in the rhetorical vision of Rogers is the journey: to Goucher College to speak at its graduation; to his alma mater, Rollins College; and to Hollywood to receive a star on the Walk of Fame, where he stood "on a makeshift podium along Hollywood Boulevard, his voice low and soothing" (Glionna, 1998, p. B-1). Rogers walks among celebrities and at the same time humbles them. "Who else would feel at home reciting 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' near the corner of Hollywood and Vine?" asked the *Los Angeles Times* (p. B-1). Readers are reminded that Rogers is doing his work in a troubled industry. Even his devotion may not be enough to stem "the child-unfriendly mess America has made of itself, a mess of guns and political self-interest and inadequate parenting" (Millmann, 1999, p. 2). Rogers "seems a man out of place . . . in this increasingly violent, noisy era" (Madigan, 1996, p. 6-D).

Coverage of Rogers suggests that this setting has not improved since he began his career in 1951. Existing programs "included a lot of throwing pies in each other's faces," Rogers has said (Madigan, 1996; Zahn, 1996). Despite the jarring

nature of these early programs, however, Rogers still held out hope: “I decided I’d like to try my hand at this new medium. It wasn’t hard to deduce that if this picture and sound were in everybody’s living room, it could have a wonderfully positive influence” (Madigan, 1996, p. 6-D). Friends and colleagues wondered if Rogers would have any impact; they often “talked about him throwing away a promising career at NBC” (Perkins, 1998, p. 3). Despite Rogers’s 3-decades-long effort, the quality of television programming has declined. Journalists note that he “is deeply troubled by the violence and quickening pace of children’s entertainment” (Louv, 1997, p. E-1). Children’s programming “engage[s] in far-fetched flights of fancy or fast-paced educational hijinks” (Lorando, 1993, p. T-7). The solution? “Let’s move this man to prime time and comfort this crazy, gun-toting, crack-addled, caffeine, and profit-line fueled nation,” pleaded one reporter (Goodman, 1998, p. D-3).

A few other clearly identifiable settings emerge. Reporters write about the Pittsburgh television studio where Rogers and his dedicated staff of 13—his “nonprofit family,” as Rogers calls them (Tucker, 1993, p. 35)—produced *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. A story by Tucker (1993) began with Rogers in the studio, “snacking on chocolate milk and peanut butter crackers” (p. 35). One journalist criticized Rogers’s spartan surroundings, saying that Rogers’s office “is decorated in early American Sears” (Froelich, 1988, p. 1-D). The same writer wondered why Rogers would base his production company in Pittsburgh, “not exactly the Mecca of TV programming” (p. 1-D). The humble office environment belies the importance of the work that goes on there: “Three Emmy statuettes won by *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* sit like forlorn bookends, ignored among the piles of clutter in the small cluster of offices that Fred Rogers calls his professional home (Madigan, 1996, p. D-6). Madigan noted that Rogers, “the man whose sweater is a popular exhibit in the Smithsonian Institution works from a closet-size space adorned with rust carpet and old furniture of the sort found at middling garage sales.” Outside of Rogers’s office were “remnants of two plaster casts, souvenirs from Rogers’s two recent ankle injuries, lighthearted reminders . . . of human vulnerability.” To David Newell, one of Rogers’ longtime collaborators, such behavior is typical: “That’s Fred. . . . He’s not at all flashy. He reflects what he is. There are no trappings to him. No glamorous offices. He is Mister Rogers” (Madigan, p. D-6). Journalists who have covered Rogers since 1969 emphasize that Rogers is grounded, accessible, not what one would expect in someone so well known. “Any TV star who can win the devotion of thousands of children, the gratitude of their parents, the respect of educators and child psychologists has to be unusual” (Berkvist, 1969, p. 21). Stevenson (1993) noted that Rogers will “turn his back on a group of senators” in order to talk with a child. “I figure the senators can wait,” he said (p. 6-D).

Another important setting in the fantasies built by reporters about Rogers is the Neighborhood of Make-Believe. Like the studio that houses it, the Neighborhood set “isn’t much to see” (Froelich, 1988, p. 1-D). The puppet-residents of the Neighborhood are “charmingly—some would say annoyingly—amateurish” (Collins, 1983, p. 1). However, reporters look past the set and are “drawn in” (Froelich, p. 1-D) by Rogers’s message. They reverently describe the Neighborhood as an oasis for children, a place to forget about the pressures of real life. Shales (1981, p. C-1)

wrote that “[i]n his neighborhood, there are no assassinations, riots, or murders”—a stark contrast to the violence they see on television and, perhaps, in their own lives. Voorhees (1990) said that “the sad truth is that children get to only visit Mister Rogers’ neighborhood—the world might be a better place if they could actually live there” (p. D-2). Saunders (1998) juxtaposed Rogers’s program with the loud, brash programs children watch today. The *Neighborhood*, he wrote, “remains an oasis of gentility and kindness in a TV jungle of crassness” (p. 2-D).

Finally, there is the implied setting of the living room—“the space between the television and the viewer” (Stevenson, 1993, p. 6-B)—a place that Rogers has called “hallowed ground” (Heffley, 1993, p. 43). The key, Rogers said in 1993, is to “be some sort of an agent for whatever is the truth.” Mass communication, he said, “is tough. Take the ‘mass’ away and it’s not so tough” (p. 43). The key, he told CNN’s Jeff Greenfield, “is to look at the television camera and present as much love as you possibly could to a person who might feel that he or she needs it” (1999).

Characters

The key character fantasy theme revolves around reporters’ admiration for Rogers’s talents and accomplishments. However, in a few stories about Rogers from the 1980s, reporters were skeptical about Rogers’s motives. Hendrickson (1982) described Rogers’s beautiful—“very beautiful”—home in Pittsburgh and the fact that Rogers rarely talks about his salary: “What seldom gets talked about in the Neighborhood of Make Believe is CASH” (p. C-1). Readers also saw a more defensive side of Rogers; he cried as he defended his approach to teaching children. “I wasn’t someone prepared for any of this. It’s just existential. It has to do with being here and with sharing yourself,” Rogers said. Hendrickson ended up respecting Rogers, even as he described parodies of Rogers by comedians including Johnny Carson. Carson took exception to an audience’s poor treatment of Rogers during an appearance in the early 1980s. “It was as if some atavistic Midwestern compassion came welling up,” Hendrickson wrote. “We may be urban-cool and all, Carson seemed to be telling his audience, but in some other, deeper ways, we’re all losers” (p. C-1).

By the 1990s, the skepticism shown by reporters about Rogers had disappeared, Heffley (1993) reeled off his accomplishments: “He’s a child development specialist, a husband of 41 years, author, father of two sons, a grandfather, an ordained Presbyterian minister, a vegetarian, and a daily swimmer.” More important, she wrote, “[h]e’s also an icon of public television, known for his quiet, slow speech, his child’s-eye view of the world, his signature cardigan and sneakers” (p. 5). Reporters now treat Rogers with unabashed reverence. Perhaps this is a product of skillful image management by Rogers. Bormann might argue that Rogers is the “sanctioning agent” of this rhetorical vision. However, reporters begin work on these stories skeptical that Rogers is as nice as they have been led to believe, or that his message still resonates with the public. Working with Rogers, though, confirms that he is as sincere and warm as they have heard. A *New York Times*

reporter wrote that Rogers “tends to induce a certain amount of uneasiness among more cynical types.” Rogers is “astonishingly genuine” (“Mr. Rogers,” 1976, p. 33), however. He talked to Shales (1981) about a television special “in a manner that suggests his gentle way with children is anything but a pose” (p. C-1). Hendrickson (1982) was at first taken aback by the “immediately reassuring, just-this-side of adenoidal voice of Fred McFeeley Rogers. Can it be real?” (p. C-1). Froelich (1988) was confident that Rogers was not “a high-strung, hysterical show-biz type surround by sycophants” (p. 1-D). Still, Madigan (1996) wondered “if the real-life Mister Rogers could ever approximate the patient, gentle persona he had embodied on children’s television for more than 40 years” (p. 6-D).

Reporters tell readers that Rogers clearly has earned labels like “America’s nurturing surrogate dad” (Collins, 1983, p. 1), “the gentle giant of children’s television” (Froelich, 1992, p. 3-B), and the “Dalai Lama of television” (Goodman, 1998, p. D-3). A writer for the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in 1991 said that Rogers had been “the World’s Nicest Grown-up for almost 25 years” (Jubera, 1991, p. E-4). Voorhees (1990) lauded Rogers’s honesty: “No actor yet born is good enough to pretend to be the gentle, caring friend of children for more than 20 years—unless he really is that way 24 hours a day, year after year” (p. D-2). Just watching Rogers work on his show enables the viewer “to understand why he has been beloved by youngsters for so many years” (p. D-2). The *Neighborhood’s* popularity and long run “are moored in Rogers’ gentle personality and unusual background, which have combined to give the show an ambience of security and caring” (Joseph, 1993, p. C-1).

Reporters write with admiration about the fact that Rogers is an ordained Presbyterian minister. “The people in our neighborhood are my congregation, and I have no other church,” he told Briggs (1975, p. 45). Wloszczyna (1992) wrote that Rogers’s “TV work is his ministry and his audience of 8 million households on more than 300 PBS stations (target age: 2–5) is his flock” (p. 1-D). Rogers “tries to touch his television friends” (Stevenson, 1996, p. 1-D) by responding to their notes—his “theology of letters.” Rogers was ordained “with a charge to continue his work with children through the media” (“Mr. Rogers Says Show,” 1992, p. C-5).

Coverage of Rogers involves a rhetorical community made up of individuals who work in and who cover television, an industry that journalists feel is badly in need of Rogers’s guidance. Jeff Gabel, head of programming for PBS, lauded Rogers for his focus on how children would react to news coverage of the Persian Gulf War. “In any time of family stress, I always go right to the greatest source of early childhood development, and that’s Fred Rogers,” he said (Bernstein, 1991, p. F-11). A *Toronto Star* reporter recalled watching in awe as Rogers “turn[ed] down the lights and guide[d] 200 normally relentless TV critics on a spiritual journey” (“Mr. Rogers Says Show,” p. C-5). According to another critic, “we were putty in his hands” (Ensign, 1993, p. 1-D). Creators of children’s programs and individuals who work in the entertainment industry are a key part of this rhetorical community. Children are inundated by what Rogers called “an overabundance of choices” (Tucker, 1993, p. 35). Reporters note that Rogers does not come out and criticize current programs; “yet one draws the inference that he is not convinced the purple dinosaur and his operators are the best thing for tiny viewers” (Tucker, p. 35).

Rogers rarely watches television. “The best moment for our program is once it’s turned off. That’s when kids can use what we’ve given them” (Wloszczyna, 1992, p. 1-D). Television should “never be seen as a substitute for interpersonal relations” (Heffley, 1998, p. F-1).

Many industry-related characters laud Rogers, despite his periodic calls for reform. Heffley (1998) quoted Angela Santomero, a creator of the children’s series *Blue’s Clues*, as saying that as a child she “talked back” to Rogers “and always wanted to jump into his world” (p. F-1). As Santomero grew up, she realized that she wanted to “create something of my own that would hopefully influence children the way he did.”

A PBS executive said the future of children’s television was bright “if we have a generation of creative producers who count Fred Rogers as their hero and their mentor” (p. F-1). These same producers probably would not try to replicate Rogers’s program. “If *Mister Rogers*’ were a new show,” Dorsey (1998) wrote, “its creators wouldn’t be able to get the program past the reception desk in this age of rock-’em, sock-’em kids shows” (p. 2-D). Television executives have a vested interest in praising Rogers’s accomplishments: He embodies both the medium’s purportedly wholesome past and its unrealized potential. Such adulation may hide a more pragmatic motive: Honoring Rogers enables television executives to deflect attention from the dwindling amount of work they do in the name of the public interest. It keeps a skeptical public at bay. Rogers is the one visionary they tolerate.

Rogers is adored by the secondary characters in the fantasy themes that emerge from coverage of his work. One such group includes child development experts and medical professionals used as sources by journalists. Nancy Curry of the University of Pittsburgh says Rogers has “tapped into the basic developmental pushes that children experience” (Heffley, 1993, p. 5). Other characters include Rogers’s own family, celebrity visitors to *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*, including jazz great Wynton Marsalis, violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman, and famed cellist Yo-Yo Ma; the many influences on his career, most notably Dr. Margaret McFarland, the well-known psychologist who urged Rogers to “offer the kids who you really are because they’ll know what’s really important to you” (Heffley, 1993, p. 5); the television networks, PBS—and the reporters themselves. Reporters create a fantasy of the hard-edged journalist whose cynicism melts in Rogers’s presence. Bunce (1993) recalled “a time when someone had to straighten me out about Mr. Rogers.” It happened when Rogers first went on the air: “I came across this gentle fellow on the tube, speaking to young viewers in what I found to be strangely measured tones.” Bunce asked himself: “Were kids really listening to this unprecedented on-camera style, or was it a stunt?” (p. 13). The answer came in a conversation between Bunce and a mother whose children watched Rogers. “‘He’s fantastic,’ she said. ‘He speaks to kids.’ And he does speak to them—individually,” Bunce (p. 13) recalled.

Perkins (1998) was struck by the intellectual force behind Rogers’s tranquil demeanor: “Rarely written about is his disarming intellect, a sort of Buddhist-like insight and peace that seems so surreal it often appears suspect to cynical journalists” (p. 3). Louv (1993) recalled when he brought his son, Matthew, to meet Rogers. Matthew was clearly nervous about meeting Rogers, so much so that “his

upper lip is quivering.” Rogers “smiles and shakes his hand and, before long, interrupts his conversation with the two adults and begins to talk directly to Matthew” (p. E-1). Rogers noticed that Matthew had taken a book on rocks out of his backpack. He told Matthew that he owns a lapidary machine. “Matthew’s eyes widen,” Louv wrote. “His own birthday present was a lapidary machine” (p. E-1). Reporters try to remain detached and skeptical, to no avail. Patrick McGuire (1993) of the *Baltimore Sun* explained his strategy for getting past Rogers’s gentle demeanor:

“Love,” you scribble in large letters. . . . It’s a word that he has been using for 25 years to just about everybody in his neighborhood. Even his fish. And so, shrewdly, you scrawl a dash after “love” and scribble the hard-hitting “What’s the big deal?” (p. 1-C)

During their interview, Rogers handed McGuire a picture of his grandson. Rogers was disappointed when McGuire told him that he left photos of his children in his office. McGuire then sheepishly asked his question about love. “Well, you know the answer, don’t you? There’s no bigger deal than love,” Rogers explained. McGuire came to a realization: “You sigh because now you understand. You don’t interview Mr. Rogers. You do what you do in any neighborhood. You hang out.” McGuire stopped playing the role of reporter: “You let the notebook fall to the floor and you just sit and just talk and sometimes you ask questions.” Rogers and McGuire ended up having a warm, friendly conversation. “Sometimes you find yourself delivering lengthy answers to thoughtful inquiries into your family, your children, your hobbies, so thrilled to find an eager listener that you eventually catch yourself blathering,” McGuire (p. 1-C) wrote. Here, McGuire stepped outside the role of observer to give his own reactions to Rogers. He made himself—and by implication, the field of journalism—a significant part of the rhetorical vision of Rogers. Rogers counters the cynicism and self-absorption that have damaged their credibility. Further, reporters are relieved to be covering someone so unpackaged. He may have an agenda, but it’s one that journalists can embrace. When Rogers appeared at a television critics press tour, Joseph (1993) asked: “What does it take to bring a roomful of jaded TV critics to a silent standstill?” Not a high-profile celebrity giving another canned interview or a staged extravaganza. The assembled critics, he wrote, “were stopped in their metaphors by a slight, soft-spoken 64-year-old ordained Presbyterian minister whose mission in life has been to use TV to help children understand and feel good about themselves” (p. C-1).

Another key rhetorical community is made up of parents and children. Parents are drawn to Rogers by their exasperation with television’s violent and sexual content. They long for a return to happier, simpler programs, even if they feel that Rogers’s message might be outdated. They may remember watching *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* and now turn to him for guidance. Rogers receives as much mail from former viewers and parents as he does from children (Heffley, 1993). A college student interviewed for one story said he still watches *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* because it helped him “understand myself better as a child” (p. 5). Par-

ents marvel at Rogers' enduring appeal. "It's funny to think that it's been on TV for such a long time," one said in 1998. "I just consider it a fact of life—like it's going to be there forever" (Walker, 1998, p. J-1). What strikes many about the program "is the feeling of being protected...being home," as one mother told Heffley (1993, p. 5). Some remember thinking as children that Rogers' show was simple, even maudlin. "But a funny thing happened to jaded baby boomers once they began to have families of their own," Wloszczyna (1992) wrote. "I used to think it was stupid the way he came in and changed his sweater," recalled a woman from Kansas. Now she watches Rogers with her young daughter, and her feelings have changed: "I think he's wonderful, so gentle. And consistent. Kids need to know he's going to feed the fish each day" (p. 1-D). Rogers's critics are outnumbered by those "hungry for less complicated, truly kinder and gentler times and desperate for figures who have never proven false" (Heffley, 1993, p. 5).

Members of Rogers's family and his friends are important, but less prominent, characters in the rhetorical vision crafted by reporters. A recurring theme in Rogers's work came from his grandfather, Fred McFeeley, during Rogers's regular Sunday visits to McFeeley's farm: "There's just one person like you and like you just the way you are" (Christy, 1992, p. 4). Rogers's wife, Joanne, plays an ancillary role in most stories about her husband, as do his sons, James and John, and his grandson, Alexander. Rogers, Joanne claims, "is the kindest person I know. One of the brightest, too. Yes, he can be annoying at times, but so can I" (Wloszczyna, 1992, p. 1-D). Rogers's generosity is genuine. He recalled for a reporter that his father had a habit of taking a couple of dollars in pennies with them on trips to New York City so that he and his son could leave them on windowsills. "I just like to think about the people who find them," he would say (Joseph, 1993, p. C-1).

Then there are Rogers's detractors. Some laugh at Rogers's "dissertations about giving and receiving" (Saunders, 1998, p. 2-D). In an era marked by "hip, cynical broadcasting," Rogers's "meek style is old fashioned, almost unctuous." Famed child psychiatrist Robert Coles expressed skepticism about the value of a series of PSAs created by Rogers to help children cope with fear about the Persian Gulf War. "It has been possible in the past for children in the United States to get through wars without massive intervention of school psychologists and television personalities" (Blau, 1991, p. C-11). "Real comfort," said a spokesperson from the Children's Television Workshop, "won't come from a television set but from a person that they love and trust." Journalists counter this skepticism about Rogers by reminding readers that he has helped millions of people. Moreover, he is more popular now than he was a decade ago (Saunders, 1998, p. 2-D). Today's cartoons do not have that kind of staying power. As Saunders noted, "The Power Rangers will never have a star on the Hollywood walk" (p. 2-D).

Action

Reporters note that regular viewers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* find a great deal of comfort in the rituals seen in every episode of the program. "The slender, somewhat fragile looking man enters the house, goes to the closet, exchanges his

suit jacket for a cardigan sweater and sits down to take off his shoes and put on casual sneakers,” wrote a *New York Times* reporter in 1976 (“Mr. Rogers,” p. 33). Rogers “smiles shyly at the camera, and, in a soft and rather tentative voice, sings a series of questions: ‘Would you be mine, could you be mine . . . Please won’t you be my neighbor?’”

Despite his “fragile appearance” (p. 33), Rogers is a hard worker, a shining example of the Protestant work ethic. An early riser, he swims every morning. He wrote every *Neighborhood* script longhand on legal pads (Saunders, 1998). In a “spritely and imaginative manner,” Rogers has acted as a kind of tour guide for children, leading them “vicariously through a range of experiences, such as visits to the dentist, inoculations by the doctor, and sadness over the death of a pet” (Briggs, 1975, p. 45). In the late 1970s, Rogers took children on a television tour of kindergarten and first grade classrooms, “pointing out things similar to what is at home—a bathroom, a place to hang your coat, for example—as well as what’s different” (Blau, 1979, p. C-16). Underneath his kind demeanor, Rogers is a tireless advocate for children. “For all his gentleness, he never ducks tough subjects,” Bunce wrote (1987, p. 33). Rogers travels the country to talk about child development issues; at every speaking engagement, he asks the audience to take “10 seconds to think of the people who have helped you become who you are” (Millmann, 1999).

Despite his busy schedule, Rogers responds personally to letters from viewers. He calls them a “blessing” (Stevenson, 1996, p. 1-D). “Every morning, before he even considers going to the Land of Make Believe, Fred Rogers opens his letters from the land of real-world children” (p. 1-D). Reporters have noted Rogers’s dismay that the range of issues raised by children has expanded so much since his program first went on the air. Today, life is more difficult and more frightening for children. “There is divorce and death. Houses that are torn down. Friends who move away. Mommies who are sick. Little brothers who fight. Angry, sad, and confused feelings. Lots of questions,” he said (p. 1-D).

A primary action fantasy centers on Rogers as an in-demand source of information on child development and on his desire to empower people to effectively guide their children. People on all sides of the debate about television respond to Rogers’s message. Few who attend his public appearances decline Rogers’s invitation to bow their heads and remember important people in their lives. “Grown-ups, from the President of the United States to network entertainment chiefs, close their eyes and oblige Mister Rogers with a moment of silence,” one reporter noted (Millman, 1999, p. 2). The heart of this fantasy is not actions taken by Rogers so much as it is the actions he wants parents and those in television to take. Television, he said in 1975, needs to provide children with examples of “honest empathetic adults” (Briggs, 1975, p. 45). Rogers believes that parents “must exercise discretion about the kind of television that enters their homes” (Collins, 1983, p. 1). Rogers wants us to get away from the maddening pace of the world as reflected through television and be with each other. “So long as children can perform well . . . adults will applaud. But I would much rather help a child be able to say who he or she is” (Briggs, p. 45).

Failure to encourage self-acceptance, Rogers warns, can have catastrophic re-

sults. In 1998, Rogers recounted the story of the young boy who killed three people in West Paducah, Kentucky. Society teaches children "to idolize the big and the flashy and the loud," he said (Saunders, 1998, p. 2-D). Broadcast industry professionals "are the servants of this nation," a role that they seem to have forgotten, reporters suggest (Greenfield, 1999). If parents don't explain televised violence to children, Rogers said, "children believe what's seen on that set is condoned by parents" (Saunders, p. 2-D). Rogers urged television critics to "encourage the producers and purveyors of all mass media to help us raise children who will reject violence and cruelty" and embrace "the good, the simple, the modest, the truthful" (Walker, 1998, p. J-1). Reporters comply by writing about how viewers and industry professionals apply lessons learned during visits to the "Neighborhood." As Rogers told NBC's Tom Brokaw: "The greatest award of all is to see somebody who has been a neighbor all along saying, 'Part of you is in my heart, and I'm going out to society and do what I can for somebody else'" (1998).

It is reassuring to journalists that Rogers applies these ideas in his relationships with members of his family. When Rogers discovered that his grandchildren were watching too much television, Rogers said something to his daughter-in-law. "It was a very serious talk, and I wasn't sure I should've done that. It was so much on my heart," he said (Walker, 1998, p. J-1). His daughter-in-law soon began limiting her children to a half hour of television a day. She called to tell Rogers that her children were playing together, reading, and working on the computer. "The creative play that has been unleashed . . . is astounding to her," Rogers said. Journalists remind readers that Rogers does indeed get angry (Reed, 1999), mainly with what he sees on television and with disregard for life, but he doesn't raise his voice or resort to violence. In his actions, in his concern for children and families, "his uncharacteristic, unmistakable fury comes through loud and clear" (Briggs, p. 45).

Have we, as one reporter suggested, outgrown Rogers? I contend that the entertainment industry treats Rogers as a parent, there to bail it out of trouble. Ever faithful in television's potential, however, Rogers rarely scolds those who work in the industry. "I sure hope there is always a choice for families and there is always a safe haven for children," he said about violence on television (Millman, 1999, p. 2). If Rogers is not the helpful parent, then perhaps he is the prodigal son; he pleases his parents as they celebrate the excess of his less responsible sibling. This theme emerges in coverage of the long string of Rogers parodies, most notably comedian Eddie Murphy's biting "Mister Robinson's Neighborhood" skit from NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. Reporters are critical of these barbs and note that Rogers now takes them in stride. Rogers's sincerity and earnestness are the target of jokes, most of them mild, but he is treated with respect. Johnny Carson once told Rogers that the jokes were an "affectionate response" to Rogers's place in the industry (Heffley, 1993, p. 43). Although the television industry lauds Rogers in news stories, though, it seems to insert him into programs only when it needs to sustain the fantasy that the industry truly acts in the public interest. The television industry co-opts Rogers's gentle criticism of television and redeploys it to assure viewers that the industry is trying to improve its programming. Solomon (2001) suggests that Rogers is a nonthreatening, nonpolitical figure whom media companies can praise without having to actually change their programming strategies.

Journalists note that Rogers's impact goes far beyond the child development materials distributed through his company and his website (Schwartz, 1999). Until recently, however, Rogers was reluctant to market his message. He waited until 1995 to release videotaped "Neighborhood" compilations because of his distaste for commercialism, a distaste embraced by reporters. "If a child sees me hawking something on TV and thinks that he or she had to have that in order for me to like him or her, that is anathema to me" (Mendoza, 1995, p. 7). Rogers deals swiftly but fairly with those who damage or misappropriate his image. In 1984, Rogers called Burger King executives and asked that they stop airing an ad that parodied him (Potts, 1984, p. D-8). "I felt that it needed to come off the air right away because of the way I feel about the host of a children's television series making any commercials at all," Rogers said. Thus, Rogers can even bring multinational corporations to heel. "It just shows that everybody will be a good boy if you're just spoken to in a nice way," said a Burger King spokesperson (p. D-8).

Conclusions

A fantasy's explanatory power, Bormann notes, "lies in its ability to account for the development, evolution, and decay of dramas that catch up groups of people and change their behavior" (2000, p. 250). Despite their different locations and professional backgrounds, these reporters are unified in their framing of Rogers as a calm, steady voice rising above the violence and packaged repetition of commercial television. They remind us that, although Rogers is somewhat undervalued and forgotten by some, he remains a beacon in the murky night of typical children's programming. Bormann (1983) contends that members of a group create a shared reality when their "private symbolic worlds incline toward each other, come more closely together, or even overlap during certain processes of communication" (p. 102). From these fantasy themes emerges a rhetorical vision of Rogers as a guru. He still believes in the original promise of television. Reporters are his willing converts and use their coverage to persuade their readers. The "villains" throughout this drama are television executives who have sacrificed the promise of television for the bottom line.

The work of these journalists suggests the presence of an interpretive community that deploys Rogers to address improving children's television and undoing the damage done to children and the family by the perils of life. Zwecker (1997) illustrated this rhetorical vision when he noted that Rogers "reminds us that gentleness equals strength; peaceful reflection is more powerful than a scream for attention; and sincere caring about another human being is the most important to bestow" (p. 3).

Does Rogers manage his image? Certainly. Journalists eagerly cover events at which he appears. Tuchman (1978) might argue that Rogers is a one-person continuing news story. Such a story is "a boon to the reporter's ability to control his or her work, to anticipate specifically, and so to dissipate future problems by projecting events into a routine." The consistency of Rogers's message makes it easier for journalists to cover him. He has become part of their "expert stock of knowledge"

(p. 57) about television and its impact on families. In the rhetorical vision that propels this relationship, though, Rogers brings journalists together much like the visits to his television “Neighborhood” did and causes them to appreciate the need for positive change in television content and a diminished role for television in the lives of children. Some reporters are skeptical of Rogers. He’s a celebrity, after all—he can’t possibly be as nice and unpackaged as he seems. The fact that he is that nice becomes a key fantasy theme. They discard the “aggressive journalist” persona; they sit at Rogers’s feet and listen. Writing about Rogers’s message may have the added benefit of helping reporters chip away at our distrust of them. We can write about good news, reporters claim. Glowing coverage of Rogers is a collective acknowledgment by reporters that the market-driven model of media responsibility that has bankrupted children’s television and threatened the integrity of the family has also damaged the journalist’s credibility. Reporters offer their confessions to Mister Rogers, then return to their newsrooms poised to look more critically at themselves and at the mass media.

Of particular interest is how much of the newsgathering process journalists expose in covering Rogers. The reporter’s respect for Rogers becomes part of the story, and an important fantasy theme. A number of the articles explored here revolve around events where journalists come together—the “overlapping” that Bormann describes. These events also provide reporters the chance to participate in interpretive communities (Zelizer, 1993) to talk about their craft. Rogers and his journalist disciples may be preaching to the converted. We all agree that Rogers is wonderful. Sure he’s corny, reporters acknowledge, but he still produces programs that are better than most of what we see. Thus, reporters subtly nudge us toward rediscovering his message—a key fantasy theme in these stories.

The television industry benefits from this rhetorical vision of Rogers. Industry executives shower him with awards and speak with admiration about his impact on the lives of children. Reporters portray this interaction as a wayward child seeking guidance, as if Rogers was the broadcasting industry’s in-house self-help person. The “Neighborhood” is not only a safe place for impressionable children, it convinces parents that television can play a positive role in the socialization of their children. Television executives point out that they still create and air children’s programming and that they work hard to sustain links to the community; Rogers reminds us of a time when broadcasters did these things out of a sense of service to the community. These articles have the feel of Rogers’s television “visits”—they give reporters a chance to sit quietly and think. Reporters write about what television was like before Rogers’s message was pushed aside by more aggressive children’s programs. The rhetorical vision seeks to reestablish a kind of social equilibrium, where the noise and commercialism of children’s television is balanced by Rogers’s quiet strength.

Do the reporters who participate in this drama overestimate Rogers’s influence? Perhaps. This rhetorical vision lacks the relevance it had 30 years ago. Reporters have built these fantasy themes on our collective memory of Rogers, where we cling to the illusion that life was simpler when Rogers went on the air. Coverage of Rogers may represent an attempt by reporters to show readers that there is still strength in the power of the imagination. Some reporters, though, are resigned to

the fact that the resonance of their rhetorical vision is fading. Goodman (1998) writes:

We ought to offer some thanks for him sticking around. Once he goes, look out. If you want to glimpse the future without Zen Master Rogers, take your preschooler and give him or her a mouth full [sic] of Skittles and a double espresso. (p. D-3)

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