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Social TV fandom and the media industries

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[0.2] Keywords—Convergence; Engagement


1. Introduction

[1.1] When I was in grad school in 2012, I designed an activity for our Intro to Television class called "Connected Screening," where students were encouraged to bring their phones and laptops. The class had a designated screening period, but it became clear a year into my time teaching the class that the days of students sitting quietly in a darkened theater without checking their phones or being on their laptops was over. "Connected Screening" was how they watched TV at home, even TV they were really interested in, and I thought it was important that the class acknowledged this. And so, for one screening week, a lecture on social media transitioned into a screening where students were asked to tweet using a designated hashtag on Twitter, with the tweets appearing on the screen next to—among other screenings—Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog (2008).

[1.2] As part of this activity, we gave students the Twitter handles for the stars and producers of the shows in question, encouraging them to attempt to use social media to bridge the gap between audience and industry. We laid out the three stars of Dr. Horrible: Neil Patrick Harris, Nathan Fillion, and Felicia Day, all of whom have significant Twitter followings. However, I would always also remark that while Harris and Fillion had large followings, Day was far more active with her followers, given the centrality of her social media profile to her celebrity (Ellcessor 2012). Yet no matter how many times I told this story, our students always tweeted at Neil Patrick Harris, believing that he could possibly reply. While it was called the "Connected" screening because of its use of technology, it was also clearly about the class feeling like they could connect to the industry that we were studying—so when Scrubs (2001–10) creator Bill Lawrence crashed the course hashtag in its first semester and joined in a conversation about Scrubs in its second, and when Neil Patrick Harris did eventually reply to my promise to eat a shoe if he did, that connection became tangible, and spoke to the transformative potential of social media in relation to the television industry.

[1.3] What it didn’t speak to, however, are the challenges that come when you move this connection beyond a contained experiment to the day-to-day business of making and watching television.

2. Social TV in 2018

[2.1] In 2007, New Review of Film and Television Studies released a special issue on "TVIII," marking what they saw as moving "into, or towards, a new television age" (Creeber and Hills 2007). In that issue, Derek Johnson wrote an article entitled "Inviting Audiences In," discussing how changes in both production and consumption are reorganizing the relationship between the audience and the industry. The article considers how the changes brought on by convergence culture can increase both the potential for audience investment and the inevitability that such investment could conflict with the corporate interests of the industry.
At the time, these invitations were primarily through the form of online transmedia experiences, typically reserved for serialized series like Lost (2004–10) or Heroes (2006–10) aimed at genre fans, which delivered alternate reality games, tie-in comics, and so on. It was exemplars of convergence like these that Henry Jenkins highlighted in Convergence Culture (2006, rev. 2008), but the changes brought by increased intersections between different media industries were limited only by the speed of technological change. In 2007, the relationship between the television industry and new media technology was reshaped by two key developments. In June, Apple released the first iPhone, beginning the age of the smartphone and a huge percentage of TV viewers watching programming while multitasking on the tiny computer in their hand. Three months earlier, Twitter made its breakthrough at the South by Southwest festival in Austin, creating a platform that would eventually give audiences a tool to broadcast their engagement and connect with the people behind their favorite shows. It was these developments that inspired the connected screening, which in 2012 still felt like it was something reserved for certain types of shows, if a larger sampling than the transmedia experiences that once defined television convergence.

But in 2018, the future brought on by these changes means that no television fan needs an invitation to engage with their favorite television show. Between Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Instagram, and Snapchat, every TV show is in some way connected to social media. While the degree to which a given show’s audience engages in this space will vary, the potential is there for any show’s audience to connect in an online environment. Every fall, I give my television studies students the assignment to track the Twitter conversation around the new series debuting that season. Even before a show debuts, networks and channels are building a social presence and working to engage potential fans. While the audience may not need an invitation, the industry is going to give them one anyway, putting hashtags on the screen and working to shape engagement to the benefit of their marketing strategies.

I organized this special issue of Transformative Works and Cultures to explore how both fans and the industry are navigating the potentials and limitations of convergence in an era where convergence is a basic requirement for a television series. While there are now platforms that promise easy connection between viewer and producer, the terms of that connection are undefined, constantly renegotiated as both sides explore the possibilities embedded in spaces like Twitter or Tumblr. Audiences now have an open invitation to engage with the television industry, but there is no rule book on what producers or viewers are meant to do in these spaces. The essays in this issue do not reveal a single way in which social media is utilized by the industry or adopted by fans: instead, it showcases a diverse range of case studies where industry and audiences test the limits of the social connection now built into the way the television industry functions, exploring moments of tension and triumph, and collectively opening a window into the social reality of contemporary television.

### 3. Praxis

This issue begins with an article that exemplifies the difficulties of inviting audiences to engage with a television series on particular terms. In "Millennial Fandom and the Failures of Switched at Birth’s Sexual Assault Education Campaign," Stephanie Anne Brown explores how the ABC Family/Freeform teen drama—which gained a strong social following in part based on its cultivation of a deaf audience—leveraged the channel’s engaged millennial audience to extend the message of a sexual assault storyline into social channels. However, Brown details the challenges faced when the messaging of the campaign intersected with the polysemic meaning of the episode itself, which fans debated intensely, and which complicated the channel’s educational efforts. The article showcases the challenges facing "very special episodes" in the age of social television, and the at times irreconcilable differences between the needs of branded social media and the emotional responses of fans of a particular program.

Those responses fuel the case study in the following article. "Intersectional Critique and Social Media Activism in Sleepy Hollow Fandom" analyzes the social media conversation around the Fox supernatural drama series, which ran for four seasons and followed a time-traveled Ichabod Crane and his African American FBI partner, Abbie Mills. Jacquelyn Arcy and Zhana Johnson focus their attention on how the presentation of Abbie’s character, critiqued by fans throughout the show's run, became a flash point at the end of the show’s third season, when actress Nicole Beharie exited the series and the character of Abbie was killed. The article highlights how the show’s social media presence failed to respond to the critiques of the character’s narrative arc: while the reasons for why Beharie left the series remain unclear, safely embedded within television production culture, the subsequent protest on Twitter showcases the
difficulties when intersectional critiques of a series are not embraced as part of the official social conversation, with Twitter being reframed as a space for activism rather than the positive engagement the industry desires.

[3.3] The industry’s effort to define the terms of this engagement is the subject of the next article, "ABC’s #TGIT and the Cultural Work of Programming Social Television." Focusing her attention on the ABC programming block built around the work of prolific producer Shonda Rhimes, Eleanor Patterson puts the current discussion of social TV into historical context, considering how the network has leveraged social media to generate flow across its Thursday night series like Grey's Anatomy (2005–), Scandal (2012–), and How to Get Away with Murder (2014–). By highlighting the role of black femininity in this branding, Patterson identifies how ABC's work is tied to the diversification of its audience, as well as to the identity work done within Rhimes's shows and within the discourse of her commitment to diversity in her programs. The article reminds us that the goals of social engagement are not dramatically different from the goals of channel branding before the internet existed while simultaneously revealing how the affordances of social branding and live tweeting have enabled new forms of audience composition that helped built one of the most notable programming blocks in television history.

[3.4] Finally, Jacinta Yanders investigates an example of social media engagement that has been embraced by both industry and fans alike. In "Interactions, Emotions, and Earpers: Wynonna Earp, the Best Fandom Ever," Yanders delves into how cable channel Syfy, creator Emily Andras, and industry and fan labor has built a significant fan base for the supernatural western series originally developed in Canada. Through analyses of the discourse around the series and an interview with the show's social media manager, the article considers how the series has avoided the pitfalls that have afflicted some of its contemporaries, particularly as it relates to its representation of marginalized individuals. While no fandom is without its challenges in the era of social media, the examples found within Wynonna Earp (2016–) show the possibilities when industry is attentive to the complexities of fandom, and when that fandom feels that their voices are being both heard and understood.

4. Symposium, Interview, and Review

[4.1] The issues raised in the Praxis section are picked up in various ways within the Symposium essays, where a group of scholars consider case studies of how the realities of social TV are affecting various elements of the television industry. In my opening essay, I focus on the much-discussed case of The 100 (2014–) and the way it highlights the absence of a social contract agreed on by all parties participating in the social conversation around a particular show. While the aftermath of the controversial death of a lesbian character created a groundswell for firm rules on how to engage in these spaces, the challenges faced in the adoption of those rules points to the tension we see throughout the articles above, and which we will continue to see in the future.

[4.2] In the next two pieces, the global reach of social media is discussed. Eloy Santos Vieira and Lilian Cristina Monteiro Françã focus their attention on Brazilian fans of the BBC’s Doctor Who (1963–89, 1996, 2005–) and how the social engagement surrounding the series’ fiftieth anniversary allowed fans from countries outside of the United Kingdom to reshape the network’s efforts to promote the series. Meanwhile, Melanie E. S. Kohnen looks at how social platforms encouraged the flow of Australian comedy Please Like Me (2013–16), which eventually made its way to the United States through the cable channel Pivot and then Hulu, but was first informally exported through images and GIF sets on Tumblr. These essays remind us that while the central case studies in this issue focus on the American television industry, part of social media’s impact is creating a space of transnational engagement, as is evident here.

[4.3] The final symposium pieces cover important ground in how our understanding of television genres and television itself is being reshaped by the ubiquity of social media. Cory Barker explores how many of these social platforms are attempting to transition to distributors, developing their own programs and delivering them to the viewers who use their platforms to engage with other TV. Jake Pitre looks at how social media has reshaped fan expectations around cult dramas like The Leftovers (2014–17) and Twin Peaks: The Return (2017), specifically focused on how the dialogue online intersects with the absence of explicit answers to ongoing mysteries in the two series.

[4.4] The Symposium section is followed by an extended conversation between the TWC editors and Flourish Klink, who has worked as a consultant facilitating the connection between industry and audience. The conversation offers tremendous insight into how social media has reshaped the dynamics between the television industry and fans while also pointing to some of the logics driving the tension identified elsewhere in the issue. While hopeful about the future
of industry-fan relations, Klink also offers an important insight into the challenges fans and industry will continue to face as they interact in online spaces, as well as her own personal role in negotiating that future.

[4.5] To conclude the issue, the reviews include Francesca Coppa reviewing Will Brooker’s *Forever Stardust: David Bowie Across the Universe* and the accompanying documentary film *Being Bowie*; Anne Kustriz reviewing *Controversies in Digital Ethics*, edited by Amber Davisson and Paul Booth; Rhiannon Bury reviewing *Public Relations and Participatory Culture*, edited by A. L. Hutchins and N. T. J. Tindall; and Mel Stanfill reviewing Emma Keltie’s *The Culture Industry and Participatory Audiences*.

### 5. Conclusion

When I screened a clip from the ABC Family/Freeform family drama *The Fosters* (2013–) on YouTube in class recently, it was clearly pulled from the original broadcast feed, so during particular scenes on screen, hashtags appeared that were meant to signal the audience to tweet their reactions to the show. It reminded me that when I was watching the show during its original airing, one particular hashtag stood out: in a storyline based around the statutory rape of the family’s eldest son by his father’s girlfriend, whoever was handling the hashtag writing for ABC Family chose to tag the scene with #BrandonsBadNight.

At the time, I was struck by how the efforts to make *The Fosters* more social fundamentally undermined the seriousness of that scene, that storyline, and the show’s overall commitment to exploring serious social issues (Kohnen 2015). However, the nature of this form of social engagement is that a significant part of the show’s viewership will have never seen it: the hashtags aren’t part of the episodes uploaded on Netflix, meaning that unless viewers were to catch a recording of the original broadcast, they would never know to look for that hashtag or the conversation around it.

Scholarship like that featured in this issue is especially important given the potential ephemerality of the moments of tension observed around social television and television fandom. Media scholars invested in this space are working not simply to observe the ongoing negotiation between these parties within the television industry but also to preserve that conversation for future observers—work that is crucial to better understanding the future of this relationship. Consider this issue an invitation for all scholars to investigate and archive such moments in social television, with the hope of being able to better understand this period of intensification in light of wherever social TV may lead us in the future.

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7. References


Millennial fandom and the failures of Switched at Birth's sexual assault education campaign

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Abstract—Since the emergence in the 1970s of the ABC Afterschool Special series, networks have sought to distance themselves from the what critics saw as the crass, shallow spectacle of mainstream television. Indeed, contemporary teen programming increasingly rejects black-and-white messages and didacticism in favor of provoking discussion both within the text and online. How, then, do "very special episodes" play out in an age of social TV, online fan discussion, and culturally edgy teen programming? By exploring a 2015 sexual assault story arc on ABC Family's teen drama, Switched at Birth (2011–17), and the network's accompanying social media fan engagement, I argue that fan conversations on social media about divisive or sensitive topics have the potential to disrupt the educational messages within teen programming. ABC Family's #SwitchedAfterChat exemplifies the ways in which fan engagement strategies that fail to adequately support online conversations surrounding sensitive or controversial topics have the potential to thwart educational messaging and to shut down lines of conversation opened by the television text itself, not only in teen programming but in television storytelling more generally.

Keywords—Cultural forum; Education; Social media; Teen TV; Television; Twitter


I. Introduction

On February 3, 2015, ABC Family (now Freeform) aired 4.05 "At First Clear Word," the second in a three-episode arc on its teen drama Switched at Birth (2011–17) addressing the issue of sexual assault on college campuses. The episode opens as Bay Kennish, one the series' two lead characters, wakes up in a dorm room, hungover and unsure of what happened the night before. The camera pans from the look of worry and confusion on her face, down to her clothes on the floor and then to the man lying next to her in bed: her ex-boyfriend, friend, and fan favorite Tank. Throughout the story arc, the show seeks not only to reflect common conversations surrounding sexual assault but also to encourage discussion about consent that goes beyond the simplistic good guy/bad guy rhetoric often seen in sexual assault plotlines across television programming. As Lizzy Weiss, the creator and showrunner of Switched at Birth, explained in interviews about the sexual assault story line, the writers set out to do a series of episodes that would "spark conversation" by keeping the plot details as "gray" as possible; they wanted to be sure not to dictate views to the audience but to allow them to wrestle with the ideological and moral implications themselves. As she told Flavorwire in an interview soon after the second episode in the arc aired: "Despite what most television says, it’s not a black-and-white matter that has a clear-cut solution at the end of the hour. The Switched at Birth writers are aware of this, and aimed to start a conversation rather than crafting a definitive account." (http://flavorwire.com/504412/we-dont-have-all-the-answers-switched-at-birth-creator-lizzy-weiss-on-the-series-campus-rape-storyline)

ABC Family and the show's producers sought to encourage discussion provoked by the episode through network-sponsored Twitter chats with the show's stars and writers, hashtags that appeared on-screen during the episode, Facebook posts, and a partnership with a national sexual assault support network. While television critics largely applauded the progressive perspective on campus sexual assault, with BuzzFeed arguing in its hallmark style...
that it "might be the bravest show on television" (https://www.buzzfeed.com/jacelacob/abc-family-switched-at-birth-campus-rape), the online reaction of fans was divided. While some did appreciate the writers' careful avoidance of "very special episode" tropes typical of sexual assault story lines, other fans blamed Bay for being an irresponsible tease and argued that the show's writers were being unfair to Tank. While Weiss claimed to want to leave the answers up to the viewers and to open up room for discussion, the story arc and its ensuing social media education campaign clearly fits within the growing campaign to popularize affirmative consent and "yes means yes" as the standard for determining sexual assault (note 1). However, the still-controversial nature of this standard meant that the episode sparked a more complicated conversation than the social media campaign was designed to handle or to which it could deftly respond. It seems that while the discussion of controversial topics, in this case about college policy, gender, and sexuality, is often heralded by critics, scholars, and fans alike, these topics can also lead to unintended fan backlash that undercut a show's intended message. Indeed, attempts to persuade young audiences to adopt the "yes means yes" standard of consent with regard to this particular story line were somewhat blunted by the ensuing social media conversation, in which fans tended to dig in their heels along common ideological lines.

[1.3] Therefore, here I want to explore the tension between the potential for discussion opened by the provocative sexual assault story arc and the ways in which ABC Family's social media fan engagement was not equipped to responsibly foster such a discussion. Through this case study, I want to start to think through the ways in which fans engage in debates on social media about complicated, controversial, or contentious topics opened by increasingly sophisticated teen TV and, more broadly, television in general. Such tension exists across television programming and is by no means a new problem; the intended meaning of texts and audience interpretation have always bumped up against one another. This case study is useful, though, for the ways in which it makes visible the growing tension between television programming and social media engagement; while networks continue to develop complex and socially relevant narratives that work to incite conversation, they have largely failed to develop complex social media responses to address a wide range of fan reaction. While "the very special episode" has long been a staple of television programming, narrowcasting and niche programming allows for increasingly nuanced narratives that deal with complicated issues like sexuality, suicide, bullying, racism, misogyny, and sexual assault. While these narratives indeed represent opportunities for conversation and education, they also put a strain on television networks' ability to guide online conversations responsibly. While networks have never had control over the ways in which audiences make meaning from their programming (Hall 1980), the rise of social media engagement makes visible the varied responses audiences have in response to complex or contentious texts and brings fans' voices together in one forum. While audience backlash or hate may be the price of online engagement for networks, in the case of increasingly sophisticated storytelling aimed at younger audiences, such backlash has the potential to undercut certain intended messages within the network's online spaces. Thus, the educational potential of shows like Switched at Birth is thwarted by oppositional fan readings made increasingly visible by social media. As networks seek to attract savvy millennial fans with nuanced, socially progressive programming, network fan engagement should offer accompanying social media campaigns that responsibly guide fan conversation and, even more optimistically, push conversations in new directions. In this particular case study, while Switched at Birth's sexual assault arc opened avenues for discussion about not just individual consent, but also about the societal structures and context in which Bay and Tank were making decisions, ultimately the social media campaign failed to push the conversation beyond the typical arguments about individual choices and responsibility.

[1.4] Specifically, I'm interested in the tension between education and discussion underlying both the television narrative and social media engagement. While Weiss understands Switched at Birth within a cultural forum framework (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983), in which the emphasis is on "the process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradictions and confusion rather than coherence" (564), an educational aim also underlies the episode and the network's branding strategy. The network and producers want to encourage discussion, but also to deliver a certain message. Discussion is, of course, an important pedagogical tool. But, as anyone who has led a classroom discussion knows, student-led discussion has the potential to take the material in unintended directions. Shows like Switched at Birth are often applauded for avoiding preaching and finger-wagging, but an unintended consequence of nuance, as the social media response to this episode highlights, is even less control over any fundamental lesson. Switched at Birth, in this case, makes visible the tricky balancing act networks face in blending educational messaging, narrative complexity, and social media engagement. This story arc in particular represents a clear case in which the creator and network acknowledged the nuance of the show's storytelling and its educational impetus, but were not able to either handle or reflect the complexity of fan responses because of the limits of their
social media engagement. To work through the various ways in which ABC Family and the *Switched at Birth* writers tried and sometimes failed to strike a responsible balance between fan engagement and sexual assault education, I first briefly discuss intersections between the literature on fan talk and Newcomb and Hirsch’s (1983) cultural forum model of television. Next, I work through the story arc itself, contextualizing it within the conventions of sexual assault in teen programming and "very special episodes." Finally, I use Louisa Ellen Stein’s (2015) work on millennial fan practices to show how ABC Family’s #SwitchedAfterChat exemplifies the ways in which social media fan engagement has yet to catch up to the rise of complex millennial television storytelling.

2. Fan talk and education: Twitter as a classroom and cultural forum

[2.1] Platforms like Twitter increasingly give viewers across the spectrum of fan engagement—from superfans to nonviewers—the ability to participate in ongoing conversations about television with varying levels of intensity. The constantly changing ecology of social media has allowed for what Matt Hills (2002) terms "just in time fandom," in which the practices of fandom have become "increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting" (16). In other words, fans and casual viewers alike can discuss new episodes of television as they air, augmenting their viewing experience with running commentary and discussion. Twitter is still probably the most popular platform for such "just in time fandom" for both casual viewers and heavily engaged fans. While scholars like Wood and Baughman (2012) have looked at very active fan engagement through Twitter, specifically fans who create user accounts for fictional characters, others, like Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns (2012), describe the ways in which during major media events, Twitter is used as a back channel through which more "ordinary" audiences offer their own running commentary on a shared media text of the event as it unfolds. Some Twitter users read their feed as a paratext rather than participating, choosing to lurk, or silently follow the conversation as it unfolds without adding their own commentary. No matter the level of active engagement, networks see "just in time fandom" practices like live tweeting as a way to incentivize live-viewing and bring back live audiences easily lost to time-shifting and increased online entertainment offerings.

[2.2] Producers and network executives increasingly encourage such practices, displaying official hashtags on screen, highlighting fan tweets during broadcasts, and building interactivity into the television text itself. As Cory Barker (2014) argues in his essay on casual forms of *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–17) fandom, the increasing merging of television viewing practices with social media engagement, or social TV, not only makes established fan communities more visible and easily able to share their own content, but also motivates more casual viewer participation as well. As social media and television increasingly converge, scholars like Matt Hills (2013) and Suzanne Scott (2008) have argued that categorizations of fandom, such as the semiotic, enunciative, and textual tripartite of fan productivity outlined by John Fiske (1992), need to be constantly reimagined; however, even as fan studies scholarship reimagines fan practices, visible creative textual productivity still often receives the greatest attention. Therefore, as social TV becomes the new norm, Barker argues, fan studies scholarship should also interrogate the "brief, conversational, and less politically engaged" (215) viewer practices that are increasingly becoming another part of regular television viewing. Indeed, drawing on Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington’s (2007) call to understand fandom "as a part of the fabric of our everyday lives" (9), Stein (2015) argues that media companies no longer fear "the excesses of the unruly fan," but are now building television ecosystems that embrace "personal investment, performativity, emotion, and excess within the context of shared digital creativity" (15).

[2.3] In this case study, I’m interested in how social TV and these more casual forms of fandom extend the educational and cultural messaging from teen programming into online spaces through fan talk (Fiske 1992); specifically, how young fans interpret and discuss social issues through their engagement with television storylines and discussion of their favorite characters. Networks increasingly encourage conversion and engagement among fans of teen dramas—not only in an effort to attract and keep an audience but also in an effort to shift attitudes, educate, and raise awareness of often complicated and controversial issues. However, as Stuart Hall (1980) has taught us, audiences don’t always adopt a media text’s intended meaning; and further, they don’t always adopt a network campaign’s intended argument. As I dug into the Twitter and Facebook discussion surrounding ABC Family’s *Switched at Birth* sexual assault story line, it became apparent that the producers, cast, and network social media accounts had limited control over the direction of the ensuing social media conversation. This, of course, isn’t surprising. Audiences frequently express their frustration, disappointment, or anger at series’ plot or character developments. This affective reaction has more troubling implications, though, when the discussion of characters and plot development pushes
potentially harmful assumptions about, in this case, rape culture and victim blaming. In her seminal research on romance novels, Janice Radway (1984) argues that to fully understand a text within popular culture, researchers must shift their focus from the text in isolation to "the complex social event of reading," where audiences "actively attribute sense to lexical signs" in the context of their ordinary lives (8). Indeed, social media has become a key part of the television reading experience, and though "the personal and the political do not always go hand in hand" (Ang 1985, 136), social TV merits exploration in the ways in which the political is understood through personal connections to one's favorite TV characters.

[2.4] Indeed, as Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) argue, "the rhetoric of television drama is a rhetoric of discussion," and that rather than imparting a single message to the audience via a closed story line, "television does not present firm ideological conclusions," but rather "comments on ideological problems" (49). However, once fan conversation becomes itself a paratext to the television show, those debates have the potential to become a part of the message. Whereas networks could absolve themselves of responsibility for what went on in viewers' living rooms, I would argue that networks and television shows that wish to label their story lines as educational have a responsibility to reasonably guide divisive conversations within the context of official social media campaigns, especially with younger audiences. Discussion is an important aspect of education, but such discussion needs to be able to match the complexity of the text in order to push it in a productive direction.

[2.5] Additionally, in extending the cultural forum model of television to online spaces through social media engagement, ABC Family/Freeform and other networks like The CW, The Disney Channel, and, increasingly, streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu, face difficulties in balancing the tension between encouraging fan discussion and imparting important messages to their impressionable fans. Further, in the era of social TV, it is important to examine how fan discussion on social media becomes a paratext that has the potential to disrupt or complicate educational messaging, and in the case of sexual assault, to trigger or harm fans who see themselves in the story. Switched at Birth, being a text that frequently tackles difficult social and personal issues, and that is aggressively marketed via social media, is then a useful site in which to examine the tension between entertainment, discussion, and education. In the following section, I will articulate the ways in which Switched at Birth draws on the genre conventions of teen drama to educate its audience about, in this case study, sexual assault. Next, I will explore the ways in which ABC Family's social media campaign failed to adequately extend this conversation online, by using Stein's (2015) theorization of network branding and millennial fan practices.

3. Switched at Birth's sexual assault story line

[3.1] Switched at Birth premiered on ABC Family in the summer of 2011 and as of this writing is airing its fifth and final season on the since renamed Freeform network. The show follows two teenagers in Kansas City, Bay (Vanessa Marano) and Daphne (Katie Leclerc), as they deal with the fallout of discovering they were brought home by the wrong families from the hospital where they were born on the same day. Like other Freeform series, the show deals with a range of issues facing teenagers specifically, and broader issues like race, class, and sexuality. Bay’s "adoptive" family, the Kennishes, resides in a wealthy, mostly white suburb, while Daphne's "adoptive" Latina single mother and grandmother are from a multicultural, working class neighborhood. Most notably, the show has been both praised and critiqued for its treatment of ability and ableism, as Daphne and a large portion of the secondary cast are deaf and many scenes are shot primarily in American Sign Language. Switched at Birth draws both on soap opera conventions and "quality television" conventions in ways that mark the series as both entertainingly dramatic and culturally and socially relevant. These strategies, similarly seen on shows like The Fosters (Freeform) and Degrassi (Netflix, in its most recent incarnation) allow networks to differentiate their programming from so-called mindless or harmful teen programming. Educational and socially relevant content has often been a branding strategy through which networks can distance themselves from the competition in terms of quality. For instance, the emergence in the 1970s of the ABC Afterschool Special series, one of the first examples of "edutainment" for teenagers, exemplified the ways in which networks sought to distance themselves from the what critics saw as the crass, shallow spectacle of mainstream television (Elman 2010, 261–62). However, contemporary prestige programming, even for teens, increasingly rejects black and white messages or didacticism in favor of raising questions and provoking discussion both within the text and online (Ross 2008, 75).
As Weiss told the press, she and her writers were hoping to bring such nuance to the campus sexual assault story arc. While many television series, from family sitcoms to adult dramas, have tackled the issue of sexual assault, they often do so in special episodes, contained story lines, or in a single Law and Order–style "ripped from the headlines" episode. Rarely do series build a story about sexual assault into the "constellation of pre-existing characters and ongoing, intertwined narratives" that soap opera storytelling allows (Treichler 2007, 108). Further, Susan Berridge (2013) argues that while female-centered teen drama series are more likely to center on the victims' experiences, challenge representations, and encourage discussion about socially sensitive topics like sexual assault, often "sexual violence narratives across the teen genre contain rather than enlarge discussions about the relationship between gender, sexuality, and power" (482). The Switched at Birth writers acknowledge this trend and wanted to open discussion where they saw it often being shut down.

This brings us to the story line at hand, which took place in the show's fourth season. The groundwork for the three-episode assault story arc was laid starting in season 3 with fallout continuing into the present fifth season. My analysis focuses on the three episodes from the fourth season immediately leading up to and following the assault, which aired from January 27, 2015, to February 10, 2015: 4.04 "We Were So Close that Nothing Used to Stand Between Us," 4.05 "At First Clear Word," and 4.06 "Black and Gray." By this point in the series, Daphne and Bay are college aged, although for complicated reasons (because in teen dramas, aren't they always?) Daphne is enrolled in the fictional University of Missouri–Kansas City while Bay has recently been released from house arrest and is enjoying her first days of freedom from her ankle bracelet. Bay has recently had a fight with her long-distance boyfriend, Emmet (Sean Berdy), and is attending a party at her friend's dorm to blow off steam. At the party, she runs into her friend and ex-boyfriend Tank (Max Adler). Episode 4.04 ends with Bay drinking alcoholic punch, or "jungle juice," with Tank at the dorm party, and episode 4.05 opens with Bay waking up naked in a dorm room and finding Tank asleep next to her (figure 1).

Figure 1. Screenshot from the opening scene of 4.05 "At First Clear Word," Switched at Birth (2015). [View larger image.]

Leading up to this point, the show has already laid the groundwork for a more complicated portrayal of sexual assault than we generally see on TV. While many sexual assault story lines on television feature marginal perpetrators characterized as "bad" or "othered" from the "good" male members of the main cast (Berridge 2013, 483), the audience has gotten to know Tank for an entire season. He is not a suspicious stranger or a bad guy; he is Bay's very close friend, her brother's roommate and a character that members of the audience likely identify with. Indeed, Weiss told Cosmopolitan that the network was initially surprised that they wanted to use Tank for this arc, but as she explained, "We were very clear that we wanted to tell a story with a character that you knew and loved. People [had] a hard time even from the promo!" (http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/tv/g-and-a/a36073/switched-at-birth-campus-sexual-assault-lizzy-weiss-interview/). Further, the audience is never shown exactly what happened the night before, with Bay and Tank offering different accounts of what happened at the party. Bay explains that she was too drunk to consent to sex, while Tank insists that she said yes and he had no way of knowing she had blacked out. Weiss noted in her Flavorwire interview that they purposely chose to show differing accounts from each character's perspective to mimic common real-life situations in which no one ever knows exactly and objectively what happened.

Berridge (2013) argues that teen drama’s tendency toward large casts and a focus on relationships allows for them to put the actual discussion of sexual violence at the center of these types of story lines. Often within discussions between characters, writers can "self-consciously deploy rape myths to then interrogate them" (482). Indeed, the show uses various character reactions to Bay's confiding in them about what happened to her to highlight common reactions to sexual assault. For instance, after Bay wakes up, she is upset because she thinks she cheated on her boyfriend.
Emmet; however, she has a nagging feeling that something else is wrong, so she confides in her birth mother Regina (Constance Marie) later that night, pretending that she’s asking the question for a friend:

[3.6] Bay: Actually, Tess has a boyfriend, a pretty serious one. I think she loves him a lot. But, I guess last night, she got really drunk. Like, smashed. And when she woke up this morning, she found out that she had sex with someone else, but she doesn’t remember it. Nothing. Blackout. Does that count as cheating? I mean, does she have to tell her boyfriend?

Regina: Well that’s awful.

Bay: That she cheated.

Regina: No, that she was raped.

Bay: What?

Regina: Well if she was so drunk that she couldn't remember it the next day, then she didn’t give consent.

Bay: Right.

Regina: Well, in my opinion. In a lot of people's opinions.

Bay: But she wasn't passed out. And what if she did give consent, but she just doesn’t remember it?

Regina: If she said yes, but she said it when she was that wasted, the guy should not have had sex with her period.

Bay: I don’t know that I agree with you. But thank you. I’ll tell her.

[3.7] In this conversation, Regina's character is used to interrogate the myths that Bay believes about sexual assault. These types of conversations happen between nearly every member of the cast, giving voice to the range of reactions that are typically offered surrounding sexual assault from "it isn’t a victim’s fault if they are raped," to "if both people are drunk, it isn’t assault" to "women shouldn't play victims." Though a wide range of opinions are offered across the cast, the show ultimately makes the argument that "yes means yes" and affirmative consent is required for sex in all circumstances, pushing back against characters that claim otherwise. The use of talk and emotional reaction in teen dramas means that consent and assault are discussed repeatedly as a central plot point, allowing the show to not only reflect common conversations about rape, but also to educate the audience, and help viewers work out their own knowledge, ideas, and feelings.

[3.8] The show goes beyond discussion of sexual assault as an individual issue and attempts to address campus policies surrounding student sexual assault. Thanks to the teen drama trope in which all adults connected to the teen characters work at the school their kids and their friends attend, Bay is able to discuss college policies with her boyfriend's mother, Melody (Marlee Matlin), who is the administrator of the deaf program and the dorm where the party took place. By the end of episode 4.05, Bay is sure that something isn’t right and has confided in Daphne and her brother. Because of the interconnectedness of the characters on the show, this means that in the opening scene of 4.06, Melody has found out about the assault and calls Bay into her office to discuss a potential investigation. In this scene Melody explains what Title IX is and how the school will investigate the events of the party. This scene complicates the story, because Melody is Bay's boyfriend’s mom, and also serves as an educational moment, because Melody is the first one to bring up Title IX, what it is, and how it affects university responses to sexual assault on campus (figure 2).
While sexual violence in teen dramas and on television in general is often framed as an individual crime rather than a systemic political issue (Berridge 2013, 482), here the show tries to broaden the scope of the discussion beyond interpersonal relationships. Additionally, teen drama’s use of serialization means that the emotional aftermath can play out over multiple episodes or even seasons. At the end of episode 4.06, Bay ultimately decides to tell the university investigators about what happened to her, confronts Tank about her decision, and finds out that Tank will be expelled from school. This episode closes one chapter of the story, but it sets in motion an emotional aftermath that will play out over a long period of time, just as it does for real-life survivors.

With this episode and with the ensuing online conversation, the writers and the network wanted to push the narrative about sexual assault beyond the commonsensical, mistaken impression that rape is only perpetrated by strangers or bad guys and to update long-held standards of consent. As Newcomb and Hirsch argue (1983), television shows that make the best use of the medium as a cultural forum “raise the forum/discussion to an intense and obvious level” not only dealing subtextually with contemporary issues, but actively raising questions and commenting on them (49). Rather than simply reflecting common-sense notions of sexual assault, Switched at Birth sought to move the conversation in a new direction; however, the conversation tended to fall along well-worn lines when it moved to Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter. While many TV critics and those who already agreed with Switched at Birth’s stance on consent and assault applauded the story line, those fans who were uncomfortable with the direction of the story line were vocal in their discontent in ways that the online campaign was ill-equipped to deal with. In the next section, I’ll explore the ways in which online fan practices have the potential to hinder potentially progressive conversation surrounding controversial issues without adequate scaffolding or support from those leading such conversations.

4. Millennial network branding and fan engagement

As television outlets have proliferated through cable and streaming services, programming, both for adults and teens, has increasingly explored controversial and sensitive issues. Simultaneously, online fandom and social media engagement surrounding television has also proliferated, thus raising questions as to the role of online fan discussions of such sensitive topics. While audiences have always differed in their interpretation and reaction to television programming, how does the ability to put these opinions in a public forum change the potential of television messaging? How do and how should networks guide fan conversation, particularly with regard to programming for teens and young adults about important and potentially triggering issues? Stein (2015) traces the evolution of the types of network branding and millennial fan practices that characterized the hybrid educational/marketing strategy ABC Family took in conjunction with the Switched at Birth sexual assault arc. In her work, she interrogates the ways in which traditional modes of fan practice have become conflated with millennial modes of media consumption. Stein specifically addresses ABC Family’s rebrand in 2007 in which the network introduced its tagline “A New Kind of Family” as a way to attract millennial viewers turned off by the idea of traditional, conservative family programming. This audience was interested in the “edginess of youth culture” but still wanted the “safety of family values” (16). The network therefore worked to emphasize the edginess of its shows’ narrative content but also the transmedia elements of its series and opportunities for digital engagement. In 2007, this meant marketing the ABC Family website as a place fans could engage with the shows while sharing their own videos and stories about family and friends (17); ten years later, digital engagement has shifted from the ABC Family website to Freeform’s social media accounts. The switch to the name Freeform is the logical conclusion to the 2007 rebranding. By dropping the term "Family" from the network name, execs hope they can attract casual viewers who still associate the word with wholesome, traditional values. The 2016 press release announcing the switch referred to ABC Family as the "most social television network"; and indeed, the network
relaunched with a daylong virtual event on Twitter, Periscope, Vine, and BuzzFeed, as well as a live Facebook chat, Instagram content, and a Pretty Little Liars Snapchat filter. The fan base cultivated by ABC Family and now Freeform is tech savvy and engaged with the network’s shows across social media platforms, in spaces that are both official and unofficial.

[4.2] Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) argue that television producers and executives are cultural interpreters that "read the culture" through its relation to the market, an argument that can be extended to marketing departments (53). At the same time, audiences bring their own background and personal beliefs to their reading of a text. While this process has always taken place, convergence culture increasingly makes these conversations visible across media platforms and across time and space (Jenkins 2006). As Matt Hills (2013) notes, fan activities and relationships have changed with shifting technologies and the "democratization of production" (130). While fan discussion may once have been limited to living rooms and friend groups, fan talk in the form of live tweeting and Facebook comments no longer "exists only for its moment of speaking" (Fiske 1992, 39) but rather is reproducible, circulatable, and public. However, while social media engagement increasingly allows for conversations around controversial narratives to take place among fans, the mutually negotiated process of reading, creating, and interpreting culture is a complex process that social media platforms, fans, and network social media managers often have trouble navigating. Further, the potential pitfalls of social media fan talk merit additional attention when debates about the realities of sexual assault and consent are intertwined with discussions about character and plot.

[4.3] To explore the potential for both productive and destructive discussion surrounding sensitive story lines, I examined the Twitter and Facebook conversations held within official spaces leading up to and following episodes 4.04 through 4.06. Over the course of these episodes, the show’s producers harnessed the existing social media publicity infrastructure of both ABC Family and Switched at Birth, using the network’s and series’ social media accounts to publicize the official conversation the show’s stars and writers would lead on Twitter during and after episode 4.05 about consent and sexual assault (figure 3).

Figure 3. The Switched at Birth official Twitter handle promotes #SwitchedAfterChat for 4.05 "At First Clear Word" (2015). [View larger image.]

[4.4] They also enlisted the help of Break The Cycle, a nonprofit that runs dating abuse programs for young people. Break the Cycle’s Twitter handle also publicized its involvement leading up to the episode (figure 4).
Figure 4. In these Twitter posts, Lizzy Weiss and Break the Cycle promote #SwitchedAfterChat. [View larger image.]

[4.5] While I directly quote all official Twitter handles, I include no identifying information of viewers and fans on Facebook and Twitter. Instead, I’ll just try to summarize general trends. To find conversations, I searched the official hashtags #SwitchedAfterChat, #SwitchedAtBirth, and #BaysDecision from January 25 to February 17 to capture conversation both leading up to and reacting to the episodes under examination. I also read through Facebook comments on the official Switched at Birth page’s promotional post made immediately after 4.05 aired (February 4, 2015). Because of all the promotional posts from the season, this one received the most comments and sparked the most debate among commenters (figure 5).

[4.6] An examination of this social media campaign shows ABC Family’s reliance on its usual transmedia branding strategies to both foster conversation and educate its viewers on sexual assault and consent faced three sometimes contradictory challenges: (1) network branding strategies often undercut the seriousness of sensitive issues and story lines; (2) the story opened potential discussion that was limited by official social media engagement; and (3) despite attempts at limitation, social media accounts weren’t able to adequately push back problematic assumptions about sexual assault and consent.

[4.7] Before getting into the online discussion itself, I want to note the uneasy relationship between network social media engagement strategies and sexual assault education present in the airing of these episodes. While the promotion of the Switched After-Chat pushed the partnership of ABC Family with nonprofits like Break the Cycle, indicating the seriousness of the discussion, the displaying of on-screen hashtags during the episode tended to undercut the real-life trauma that sexual assault victims face. ABC Family, and now Freeform, will often promote episodes with hashtags about a major upcoming plot point. This hashtag then displays on screen during pivotal moments during episodes to encourage, organize, and track social media conversation surrounding certain plotlines. In this case, however, because the typical dramatic beats of a teen drama were tied up with the difficult and raw experience of sexual assault, the use of pithy hashtags for promotion felt inappropriate. One of the most disquieting examples was the use of the hashtag #BaysDecision, leading up to and during the conversation between Bay and Tank in 4.06 "Black and Gray" when Bay explains that she’s decided to cooperate with the Title IX investigation against Tank (figure 6).
While encouraging fans to discuss and work through their likely complicated feelings about the episode, the direct application of branding strategies to an educational plotline about young people and sexual assault starts to reveal the ways in which the social media marketing infrastructure isn’t designed to adequately guide such a precarious discussion.

Moving to the online fan activity itself, the network’s aim was and still is to cultivate the correct type of fans, ones who are "willing to go the extra mile in terms of textual investment yet happy to play within the officially demarcated lines"(18). Stein argues that ABC Family essentially sought to domesticate fan behavior by merging it with millennial viewer practices. The network needs to harness online fandom in order to bolster its brand without encouraging any behavior too far outside of the mainstream and to attract viewers who are media savvy yet still "malleable for advertisers" (18). This means that while the episode itself may have opened possibilities for the discussion of sexual assault, the official Twitter engagement stuck to a constrained set of talking points, even when faced with complicated questions or pushback from fans. The merging of educational talking points with the needs of millennial brand engagement led to stilted and scripted conversations that rarely moved beyond the repetition of the need for "clear, affirmative consent" in sexual situations. Although Weiss claims she wanted to "spark conversation" and let fans come to their own conclusions about the story, the official message of both the episode and the Twitter campaign led by the show’s stars and writers guided fans to take away a single, specific message: that Bay wasn’t at fault for Tank’s having sex with her while she was drunk. Figure 7 illustrates a typical exchange.

Furthermore, while both the episode and the ensuing social media conversation sought to shift the onus of responsibility from the victim to the perpetrator by emphasizing that "yes means yes," the social media campaign failed...
farther the episode’s conversation about the wider cultural, political, and social ideologies that lead to campus rape culture. This is the main area in which the media text and social media paratexts diverge. While the episode tried to invoke wider systems of power in its portrayal of sexual assault, the online chat largely framed sexual assault as an issue between two individuals. Networks may be able to distance themselves somewhat from controversial storytelling within their series, but online network branding, publicity, and legal concerns likely necessitate that ABC Family’s social media accounts avoid saying anything controversial, complicated, or combative. Even—perhaps especially—surrounding complex and divisive subjects, official accounts need to place boundaries around fan discussion. ABC Family’s social media campaign seemed comfortable educating its audience about individual responsibility in cases of rape and sexual assault, but less comfortable addressing the societal ideologies and systems undergirding campus rape culture or in educating fans who were not already on board with affirmative consent or the existence of rape culture. This is the clearest example of the ways in which the goals of the series did not necessarily align with the goals of the network. Further, it highlights the ways in which Switched at Birth sits at an uneasy intersection of cultural forum, educational text, and network property.

[4.11] When fans did ask complicated questions, tried to engage in debate, or pushed back against talking points, official accounts directed them to seek further information from Break The Cycle’s (https://www.breakthecycle.org/blog/back-school-defining-consent-sexual-relationships) and Love Is Respect’s (http://www.loveisrespect.org/healthy-relationships/what-consent/) websites, two organizations that emphasize affirmative consent and constant communication within sexual relationships and that encourage the use of their hotlines to talk to professionals about consent, dating, and sexual activity. Both the episode and the Twitter conversation seemed to take their talking points from these and similar educational nonprofits that stress that “asking for consent every step of the way means engaging in open and honest communication between both partners” and that "alcohol...is not an excuse" (https://www.breakthecycle.org/blog/back-school-defining-consent-sexual-relationships). The use of such educational material both within the episode and the online campaign further underscores the instructional aims of the story arc beyond entertainment or even "sparking discussion." However, in practice, the online instruction did not appear to be designed to go beyond delivering the message of affirmative consent. Neither the network nor the nonprofits had a cohesive strategy for engaging in a more complicated productive dialogue with fans who were resistant to or confused by the message.

[4.12] For instance, when one viewer said she could see both Tank’s and Bay’s sides and asked how she should feel if this had happened to her, Break the Cycle responded by sending her to the Love Is Respect website to talk to counselors about consent and assault. This is, of course, likely useful for this particular fan or others seeking these types of resources, but does little to visibly engage with the question on Twitter in a forum being read by other fans. Similarly, another viewer asked how she could protect herself, since she was the same age as Bay, to which Break the Cycle responded, “Always remember, it’s never your responsibility to protect yourself from sexual assault.” While this is a necessary message to combat the ideology that women are responsible for keeping themselves from being raped, it fails to educate audiences about actions they can take to combat rape culture and to agitate for concrete solutions like policy changes and campus reform. To be clear, I don’t want to be cynical or suggest that these resources aren’t vital and useful, especially to younger viewers who may need support or education. The decision to partner with sexual assault organizations to educate viewers is, of course, an admirable one. Rather, I use these examples to highlight the ways in which online discussions can constrain the extent to which social or political issues raised within teenage television can be explored within official network spaces. Both Berridge (2013) and Stein (2015) note the ways in which popular television and social media hold potential for expanded creativity, imagination, and conversation that isn’t always fully realized.

[4.13] An additional contradictory issue with the campaign was a failure to constrain potentially destructive conversation. While millennial network social media engagement tries to guide fan behavior by promoting the use of official hashtags, suggesting topics of discussion, and encouraging interaction with network accounts, as Stein (2015) further theorizes, millennial fans don’t just engage in discussion within official boundaries or along intended ideological lines. Rather, the "ideological meaning and aesthetic moments set in motion by a millennial television series and its paratexts enter a stew of swirling meanings that coexist online in network condoned spaces and in spaces beyond network control" (63). Although the reaction to the episode by television critics was almost universally positive, fans were notably divided between praise and anger. While Weiss wanted younger audience members to understand that rape isn’t always perpetrated by "bad guys" or strangers, this message seemed to get away from her within the
ensuing fan debate. At best, fans seemed to dig their heels into whatever their previously held beliefs about assault and consent were before the episode. In other words, the same genre conventions that help open discussions about health and sexual assault within soaps and teen dramas—serialized story lines, ongoing conversations about issues, fan attachment to characters, and story lines that reject black and white morality—also have the potential to derail them.

[4.14] Not surprisingly, because the writers worked so hard to mimic real-life situations, viewers had many negative reactions to Bay’s fictional assault, comparable to those of real-life incidents of sexual assault. First, because Tank was such a well-liked character, as actual assailants often are, many fans took his side and criticized the writers for destroying his character, and blamed Bay for not taking responsibility for her actions. Comments ranged from fans expressing sympathy for Tank’s side to fans expressing anger at the writers to fans arguing that Bay’s character just felt guilty for cheating on her boyfriend and therefore decided to blame it on Tank. Secondly, because the writers chose only to show the night’s events from Bay and Tank’s differing perspectives and not from a third-person omniscient point of view, fans were frustrated that there was no cut-and-dry answer to how they should interpret the outcome. For instance, in the two weeks after the episode aired, one commentator on the Double X Chromosome Subreddit, an unofficial space for discussing women’s issues, argued, “It would have been better if the course of the night’s events were explicit.” Finally, as often happens in discussions of real-world assault cases, fans were upset that Tank got in trouble even though he was also drunk, and accused the writers of forcing a “dangerous agenda” on their audience. Another Redditor from the same thread argued that the writers were basically claiming that "men can’t be raped" and undermining the credibility of “real” survivors by claiming Bay was a victim when she wasn’t.

[4.15] This conversation also serves as an example of how fan talk moves between official and unofficial channels. While fan talk took place within condoned spaces officially encouraged by ABC Family, conversations also happened in unofficial spaces like Reddit threads, showing the ways in which millennial engagement extends beyond network-defined channels. Social media is seen by networks as a useful way to engage with fans, encourage live viewing, create interactive experiences, and attract media savvy viewers; however, social media has similar potential to bring fans together in ways that push back against network messaging and unite viewers in anger or disappointment rather than pleasure and enjoyment. Further, social media engagement has the potential both to help and hinder television series’ attempts to push certain social and political ideologies. While pop culture holds potential for health education and social issue awareness, millennial fan engagement and the rise of social TV complicates the ways in which these messages reach their intended audience. As audience and fan scholars have long argued, networks, writers, critics, and scholars cannot take as a given that audiences will take from a text its intended meaning. Social media engagement both makes resistant readings more visible and carries the potential to spread such readings across space and time. Resistant readings carry additional significance when they are tied up with educating and promoting discussion of issues like sexual assault and rape culture that already face significant pushback within the public sphere.

[4.16] In this case, while the writers intended for their handling of sexual assault to complicate television’s usual narratives, and though the genre of the teen drama was indeed used to complicate the typical sexual assault story line, the online chat makes visible the ways in which nuance and complexity, while generally seen as admirable, can be rejected by viewers’ negotiated readings of the text. Further, the online conversation brings these negotiated and openly hostile readings beyond viewers’ own living rooms, potentially undermining the intended outcome of the Switched After-Chat.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] This case study examines the ways in which discussions surrounding sensitive or controversial topics can be both helped and hindered through fan talk surrounding television texts, and how the educational potential of shows like Switched at Birth needs to be accompanied by more sophisticated social media engagement. ABC Family’s clumsy attempt to apply its usual #SwitchedAfterChat framework to an especially sensitive and complicated story about sexual assault makes visible the ways in which the awareness and education encouraged by millennial teen dramas can be undercut by these same conventions. While many television critics applauded the producers and writers for complicating the usual depiction of sexual assault on television, the social media conversation made clear that many fans found the narrative frustrating in ways that caused them to dig their heels in on their preexisting understanding of sexual assault and consent. These challenges, of course, aren’t confined to teen TV but play out within adult programming as well. As debates about sensitive topics, from sexual assault to racism to sexuality to religion, play out
on our television screens and online, how might networks and fans themselves work to foster a more productive online space? As anyone who has spent time on Twitter knows, the platform has the potential to both foster and break down discussion, so it’s no surprise that fan conversation is any different. No network or showrunner will ever nor should ever want to control all ensuing fan talk; however, if networks want to better foster conversations surrounding their own programming, they need to commit resources to doing so rather than relying on typical marketing strategies. Instead of sticking to a rote set of talking points or employing actors and actresses to guide complex conversations, networks might bring in educators familiar with online spaces and debate to more fully respond to fan questions, pushback, and divisive rhetoric. While partnering with a nonprofit is a useful first step, a broader approach to sexual assault would need to involve not only those equipped to deal with individual concerns, but also experts knowledgeable about the social and political contexts in which sexual assault happens and is understood. Networks might also foster relationships with fans who frequently guide and engage in discussion to help lead ensuing conversations surrounding particularly sensitive episodes. While I don’t have space to address a wider range of programming in this piece, future research may further theorize fan talk as debate over social issues and best practices as to how networks and fans can foster productive discussions surrounding sensitive topics both within millennial spaces and within a broader range of media texts.

6. Note

1. For an in-depth look at the history, context, and controversy surrounding affirmative consent and the growing campaign to implement "yes means yes" policies at college campuses, see Signs' digital archive of related articles, both popular and scholarly (http://signsjournal.org/currents-affirmative-consent/affirmative-consent-and-yes-means-yes/).

7. Works cited


Intersectional critique and social media activism in Sleepy Hollow fandom

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Abstract—We examine fans’ social media engagement with the supernatural detective series Sleepy Hollow (2013–17) and argue that fan discourses about the African American police detective Abbie Mills address the representational and institutional treatment of women of color. Sleepy Hollow fans use social media to counter and reshape industry narratives that often cast Black women as archetypes. We explore how fans recreate meaning by writing fan fiction, how fans collectively critique stereotypes on social media, and how fan boycotts challenge media institutions. By charting the evolution of fan responses to Abbie Mills’s narrative arc over three seasons, we explore the potential for fan actions to disrupt the television industry. While fan activism is unlikely to alter the industry objectives of a capitalist media system or reconfigure power dynamics between producers and consumers, organized actions can resist institutional efforts to channel fan activity into show promotion.

Keyword—Fandom; Gender; Intersectionality; Race; Social TV


I. Introduction

[1.1] When Sleepy Hollow (2013–17) premiered on Fox in the fall of 2013, it was widely hailed for its diverse casting, with Asian, Latino, and African American actors in key roles, including Abbie Mills, its Black female co-lead. The supernatural detective series centers on Ichabod Crane (Tom Mison), a former Revolutionary War captain resurrected after being hexed for 250 years, and his reluctant partner, police lieutenant Abigail Mills (Nicole Beharie). Destined to fulfill their role as the two witnesses mentioned in the biblical Book of Revelation, the pair are tasked with averting the impending apocalypse and defeating the four horsemen. While its promising first season attracted eight million viewers and an extremely passionate fan base (Adalian 2013), unsatisfactory character arcs, abundant plot holes, and brewing trouble behind the scenes resulted in turnover among the showrunners and a rise in fan criticism. Abbie Mills went from a protagonist in season 1 to a plot device in season 2, and when she was unexpectedly killed off at the end of season 3 fans launched a social media campaign to boycott the series.

[1.2] Here we examine some of the online strategies fans used to recuperate the Abbie Mills character and explore the potential for fan actions to disrupt the television industry. We argue that Sleepy Hollow fan fiction and social media campaigns drew attention to the stereotypical treatment of Black women in television, but did not ultimately affect the trajectory of the show. Even after widespread fan backlash against Abbie’s death, Fox renewed the series for a fourth season and replaced Mills with another tough-talking woman of color, played by Janina Gavankar. This decision can be attributed to two industry imperatives: a desire to reduce production costs by favoring action-oriented stories over character (and actors), and an attempt to boost advertising sales by courting a younger, whiter, male audience. The
eventual cancellation of the series was a result of myriad factors including a steep decline in viewership and ratings, a scheduling shift to Friday night, and a significant story reboot (Wagmeister 2017).

[1.3] While it is unlikely that fan activism will alter industry objectives in a capitalist media system, we argue that organized actions can disrupt institutional efforts to channel fan activity into show promotion. In the convergent media era, television companies are expanding efforts to monetize fans’ social media engagement. In an attempt to "control content and profits," Katherine Morrissey (2013, ¶ 3.3) explains, media industries work to "reposition fan production within controlled production environments that then license and limit creative work." In fan studies work on fans’ collective power to affect the television industry, scholars frame fans as activists with influence over production and potentially politics (Jenkins 2006; Lopez 2011), or as exploited laborers whose activities are co-opted by television networks (Andrejevic 2008; Lozano Delmar and Bourdaa 2015). Our analysis of Sleepy Hollow fandom complicates these conflicting assumptions by showing that fans actively resist the ways their engagement is utilized by media companies. As one fan writes, "Sleepy Hollow producers are now learning that when they deputize fans into an unpaid (and therefore uncontrollable) arm of their marketing team, those fans feel invested in the series like never before. They also feel entitled to have their voices heard," and after particularly egregious offenses "some of Sleepy Hollow’s most loyal fans decided they’d had enough" (James 2014). We argue that fans’ shifting focus from producing fan texts to boycotting a series actively challenges industry efforts to use fan labor as free series promotion and audience research.

[1.4] Further, Sleepy Hollow fans’ strategies underscore the ways marginalized groups use social media to challenge institutional hierarchies and circulate transformative works. While much of the scholarship in fan studies has focused solely on the gender identity of white, middle-class, female fans (Jenkins [1992] 2013, 1), this study considers how race and gender co-constitute fan practice. Taking up Rebecca Wanzo’s (2015) call to bring African American scholarship to bear on American fan studies, we draw on Kimberle Crenshaw’s (1993) theory of intersectionality and bell hooks’s (1992) oppositional gaze to analyze how Sleepy Hollow fans developed an intersectional critique of the representational and institutional treatment of women of color.

[1.5] Looking first at season 1, we explore how fan fiction writers create new storylines for Abbie Mills that seek to empower Black women. Using content analysis, we look at fan fics that "ship" Abbie Mills and Ichabod Crane on two popular open-source and fan-run fan fiction websites, FanFiction.net and the Archive of Our Own, selected for their extensive collections and diverse content. We categorized themes from forty-five stories on FanFiction.net and 1,108 stories on the Archive of Our Own and analyzed specific texts that reflect broad themes within the fandom. Next, we explore fan critiques of Mills’s stereotypical representation using the Twitter hashtag #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter, a trending fan campaign developed during season 2 to address fans’ concern about "what appeared to be the gradual transformation of Abbie Mills into a sidekick" (James 2014; see also Cheng 2016). We focus our analysis on Twitter because it is the most popular internet platform for social conversations about television and because it is a forum broadcasters carefully monitor for audience feedback (Goldstein 2013). We code recurring themes in tweets aggregated under the hashtag #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter and, following Day and Christian (2017, ¶ 2.4), we use critical discourse analysis to assess how viewers "draw on their own experiences in life, with the show, and with other media texts to formulate responses to the representation of" Black female identity. In the final section, we unpack how social media campaigns disrupt industry imperatives by analyzing fans’ social media activism during season 3. We look at the hashtag campaigns #CancelSleepyHollow and #IAmAbbieMills to show how Sleepy Hollow fans halted fanon production and resisted industry efforts to shape fan engagement. Throughout, we draw upon commentary from popular bloggers in feminist, Black nerd, and nerds of color communities to contextualize fans’ social media campaigns. Tracing the fandom’s shifting focus from media production to media refusal, we analyze the efficacy of each strategy for challenging media representations and industry imperatives.

2. Social TV and intersectional fans

[2.1] In Textual Poachers, Henry Jenkins’s study of television fans, he describes the relationship between fans and producers as a process of negotiation over a text’s meaning. Fans engage with television by "poaching" desirable elements of media narratives, writing new stories (fan fiction), and fostering communities to create and circulate fan content. Often fans seek to influence industry executives to prolong a show’s tenure or shape narrative trajectories. For instance, in Jenkins’s ([1992] 2013) ethnographic study of Beauty and the Beast (1987–90) fandom, he finds that fans’ anger over the death of the beloved female lead resulted in an autonomous fan culture. When a show disappoints
views, fans create and consume their own stories to fulfill a collective desire, in this case for a romantic coupling between the leads. Jenkins concludes that fan fiction—mostly written by women about romantic relationships—can recuperate media narratives that dismiss women's desires in favor of more action-oriented male stories.

[2.2] But, as Christine Scodari and Jenna Felder (2000) argue, fan fiction does not counteract the marginalization of women's sensibilities in mass media. Their study of "shippers"—mostly female fans who desire a romantic relationship between two characters—reveals that fans' resistance to gender roles and male-driven narratives pales in comparison to the structures of capitalist media institutions. Focusing on the commercial imperatives that impact production, Scodari and Felder (240) point out that advertisers pay more to reach younger male viewers. In turn, producers privilege action narratives to court the coveted male demographic, while female fans' desire for romance is left to languish in conjecture. Although fan fiction provides a way for women to depict romantic relationships outside the original text, Scodari and Felder (254) argue that fans' unpaid labor will not transform the commercial and patriarchal media system that systematically disregards women's stories.

[2.3] While the prevailing industry logic continues to value masculine stories and viewers, much has changed at the level of producer-fan interactions. With the development of the internet, fan communities on websites, blogs, and social media platforms have exponentially increased and enabled casual viewers to become active fans. Social media has opened up the lines of communication between producers and consumers, endowing fans with ostensible influence and executives with new opportunities to monetize engagement. To shed light on the question of whether power resides within active fan communities or industry structures, we examine specific fan uses of social media. The integration of television and social media, called "social TV," involves using sites like Twitter to discuss television in real time as a backchannel to live programming or as an asynchronous platform for fan discussions (Harrington, Highfield, and Bruns 2013). Participants can join a conversation by using dedicated hashtags created by official sources or individual users. Those who celebrate the empowerment of active audiences argue that social media sustains fan discourses and makes them more widely visible. Viewers can tweet at television producers, wage public campaigns, and create and circulate fan-produced content. On the other hand, producers and networks capitalize on social TV in three key ways: by mining social media streams for audience feedback and data, by appropriating fan activities to promote TV shows, and by making television more interactive and engaging (Bourdaja and Lozano Delmar 2016).

[2.4] As fans and producers develop new promotional strategies in the convergent TV era, they face constant negotiation and contestation. Fan efforts to reassign meaning or assert influence often fall under the rubric of promotional activities and valuable audience research. At the same time, content creators face mounting pressure to cultivate relationships with viewers online to extend audience engagement and help promote the show. Television executives have a fraught relationship with fans; while fan feedback can provide invaluable audience research, it may also disrupt showrunners' creative vision (Andrejevic 2008; Jensen 2012). This dynamic is further complicated when a series involves multiple creators and producers. As Myles McNutt (2013) explains, Sleepy Hollow's co-creator Phillip Iscove and Mark Goffman, showrunner during season 2, both "engage and interact with fans from a position of authorship by answering questions or offering teases of future episodes." When Sleepy Hollow producers noticed fan campaigns to further develop Mills's character in season 2, Goffman initially appeared responsive to fans' concerns, stating in an interview, "If people just trust us—if you keep watching, things will change in a way that you won't expect" (Busis 2014). But Goffman left the show before season 3 began and was unable to deliver on his promise.

[2.5] To understand the complex relationship between Sleepy Hollow producers and fans, it is important to note that many Abbie Mills supporters are also Black women. This case study centers on the identity and experiences of African American women by bringing Black feminist scholarship to bear on fan studies. Fan studies scholarship in the convergent era has largely ignored social identity in favor of analyses of the experiences of a default fan, presumed to be "white, middle-class, male, heterosexual" (Gatson and Reid 2012, ¶ 4.1). This is particularly surprising as early fan studies research focused on female fans who had historically been left out of male-dominated fan communities. This body of work documents the proliferation of female characters recast as strong, competent women in woman-produced fan fiction (Jenkins [1992] 2013; Penley 1992; Bacon-Smith 1992), advancing our understanding of the gender politics involved in shipping (desire for romantic relationships) and slashing (desire for same-sex attraction). Scholars saw these practices as a way for "marginalized, neglected female sci-fi fans to express their passion for their favorite shows, lay claim to the narrative, and even impishly subvert a geek fan culture that, until recently, has been largely male-targeted and male-driven" (Jensen 2012). In more recent scholarship, however, the question of gender has
dropped out of focus (Driscoll and Gregg 2011), and little attention has been paid to race (except see Lopez 2011; Wanzo 2015; Warner 2015a).

Wanzo (2015) suggests that one of the reasons fan scholarship overlooks race is that the existence of racism subverts the idealistic view of fan communities as progressive and inclusive. Rukmini Pande and Swati Moitra's (2017) study of queer femslash fandoms brings these competing views to the fore by showing that some fan practices perpetuate racial erasure while others work toward inclusion. In a particularly apt case, Dominique Johnson's (2015) study of The Walking Dead (2010–) fandom reveals how participants’ discussion of the African American female character Michonne reinforces dehumanizing racial stereotypes of Black women. Turning their attention to fans of color, Faithe Day and Aymar Jean Christian (2017) find that marginalized audiences use online forums to collectively analyze and react to media texts. Kristen Warner's (2015b) work bears this out as she analyzes Black women’s responses to the love affair between a Black woman and a white US president in the network drama Scandal (2012–). Warner posits that Black women take pleasure in the depiction of a desirable Black female protagonist because mainstream media culture excludes Black women—as both actors and consumers—from romance. By underscoring race, this genealogy of fan studies disrupts utopian visions of fannish activities and indexes the ways fans of color are transforming fan communities and the media industry writ large.

Our contribution to the scholarship on race and fandom explores how fans’ collective online engagement challenges the television industry’s sweeping efforts to harness fan labor for network promotion. Following Wanzo’s (2015) call to bring Black popular culture research into the fan studies canon, we use Crenshaw’s (1993) theory of intersectionality to account for the particular ways race and gender oppression intersect for women of color. We also draw on hooks’s (1992) concept of the oppositional gaze—a way of looking that resists dominant media narratives—to theorize how Sleepy Hollow fans reject commercial imperatives to cater to young white male viewers and (perhaps inadvertently) develop tactics that disrupt the role of fans as social media marketers. In what follows, we examine fan-driven social media campaigns on Twitter from the debut of Sleepy Hollow in 2013 through the season 4 premiere in 2017.

3. Ichabbie: Fan shipping and the oppositional gaze

Sleepy Hollow’s procedural detective format couples melodramatic narratives and supernatural horror in a generic hybrid designed to appeal to both male and female audiences. Whereas detective stories and dramatic action are hallmarks of traditionally male genres, the ardent relationship between Ichabod and Abbie is meant to appeal to women. Gender and genre mixing is not new; the television industry has a long history of creating hybrid formats to broaden its appeal to different types of audiences (Gitlin 1983; Scodari and Felder 2000). Sleepy Hollow’s genre structure can be traced back to the long-running science fiction drama The X-Files (1993–2002), which, Scodari and Felder (2000, 245) find, pioneered the amalgam between the feminine elements of melodrama, emotional realism, and character-driven serial narrative and the masculine, plot-driven, episodic format. While the TV industry uses cisgender-based assumptions to script and market its programs, it is important to note that actual audiences regularly defy expectations; many women watch male-targeted series and vice versa. What is significant about Sleepy Hollow’s generic hybrid is that detective, action-centered stories dominate the narrative while the budding romance is relegated to the background. Nevertheless, Sleepy Hollow writers teased a potential romantic relationship between Ichabod and Abbie by employing the classic will-they-or-won’t-they and opposites-attract tropes. Because genre conventions provide viewers with a set of assumptions and patterns to guide their reactions (Mittell 2010), it is not surprising many female fans shipped the co-leads.

Fans’ desire to see Ichabod and Abbie fall in love can also be attributed to the narrative expectations in the romantic genre. As Janice Radway (1984) explains in her study of romantic fiction, the “ideal romance” between an initially independent heroine and a distant hero follows a typical formula: first the heroine’s social identity is destroyed, then she engages in an antagonistic relationship with the hero, and finally, after a period of separation, she is reunited with the hero, he is kind to her, and she responds warmly. The narrative arc concludes as the hero declares his love for the heroine and her identity is restored (Radway 1984, 134). Throughout season 1, Ichabod and Abbie’s relationship closely follows this pattern. Initially, Abbie’s plan to join the FBI and begin a new life is thwarted when Ichabod arrives in Sleepy Hollow. Then Ichabod and Abbie struggle to relate to one another and tensions arise from their differences in race, gender, and era. In later episodes, Abbie and Ichabod come to each other’s aid and eventually connect by working
through past traumas together. At the end of season 1, their devotion to one another is cemented when Abbie sacrifices herself, taking his wife Katrina’s (Katia Winter) place in purgatory. This separation fulfills the ideal narrative script and suggests that, when reunited, they will fall in love.

[3.3] However, writers did not develop a romantic plot for Abbie and Ichabod in season 2. In response, devoted Sleepy Hollow viewers used new media to produce fan art, short stories, and videos that give Ichabod and Abbie full lives and new adventures in alternate time lines and universes parallel to the narratives of the show. Jenkins’s study of pre-internet fan fiction in Textual Poachers ([1992] 2013) examines how fans produce new meaning through the act of “poaching” canonical elements and repurposing them to suit fan interests. According to Jenkins, active audiences may not like or agree with canonical narratives and can quickly shift from eagerly accepting a text to actively resisting its transformations. Fans’ “reading practices can be mobilized into active opposition to producer efforts...Fans’ own rewriting of textual materials makes them active critics of future narrative developments and protectors of what they see as central to the program” (124). Within a fannish universe, Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (2006, 7) explain, the multiplicity of fan works creates a “communal (albeit contentious and contradictory) interpretation” of meanings within a source text. Fans’ collective assumptions, what Sheenagh Pugh (2005) calls “fanon,” come to supplement the original canon. A significant element of the Sleepy Hollow fandom is the overwhelming consensus that Ichabod and Abbie are in love. By taking a look the Sleepy Hollow fanon, we will see how shipping narratives reveal broader concerns about representations of Black women in popular culture.

[3.4] Sleepy Hollow fan texts vary in form and content; some are short one-off narratives, while others are as lengthy as a novel. Some stories remain within the Sleepy Hollow realm, while alternate universe (AU) stories reimagine the characters in different contexts. The latter give writers more creative liberty with the characters, enabling them to move away from fixed patterns and narratives established by the creators of the property. In Sleepy Hollow fandom, most fan fics explore the "Ichabbie" romance—a portmanteau of "Ichabod" and "Abbie." Media fandoms are largely made up of women and thus reflect women’s concerns (Jenkins [1992] 2013, 48, 83). As Jenkins suggests, "fans are drawn to particular programs because they provide the materials most appropriate for talking about topics of more direct concern," such as "conceptions of masculinity and femininity" and "intraracial relations" (83). Ichabbie fan fiction, we argue, seeks to recuperate romantic roles for Black women by removing Abbie from the realm of sexless sidekick and giving her a loving relationship.

[3.5] Ichabbie fan texts collectively retell Abbie’s story in a way that empowers Black women. Jacqueline Bobo explains that marginalized viewers employ subversive reading tactics, what bell hooks deem an "oppositional gaze," to find pleasure in problematic media representations (Bobo 2002; hooks 1992). Communities of Black women viewers, Bobo suggests, create a "heightened consciousness" around intersectional oppressions and work to "create new self-images" and become a "force for change" (224). Even though the TV show presents only white love interests for Ichabod, fans employ an oppositional gaze to reimagine the canon and create a multidimensional Black woman who resists stereotypical images.

[3.6] One strand of Ichabbie fan fiction seeks to amend Abbie’s demeanor as an aggressive and sometimes crude detective by developing her feminine side. To complicate her tough exterior on the show, the author of "Crying Lightning" (opalheart12 2016) depicts Abbie as multifaceted and open to sharing her feelings, without sacrificing her strength. As the story develops their love affair, Ichabod and Abbie are portrayed as much more emotionally available than they are on the show. Take these lines of introspection: "There was something between he and Abbie that felt organic, real...He knew that he didn’t need to run away from whatever was between them." The author foregrounds Abbie’s femininity by using descriptive words like "soft" and "sensual" while still maintaining her characteristic assertiveness. This balance is evident in the following account of an embrace: "She leaned forward and kissed him, soft and savoring, pulling him as close to her as she could get." By repositioning Abbie as a more feminine and emotionally vulnerable woman, fan fics subvert Abbie's canonical portrayal and undermine the stereotype that Black women are emotionally unavailable.

[3.7] The exploration of Abbie’s femininity also manifests in pregnancy fan fics. In these stories, fans probe the potential for Ichabod and Abbie to be married and expecting a child—the ultimate domesticity. Whether set during or after the apocalyptic timeline or posited as an AU story, Ichabod and Abbie are imagined as happy together. The story "Improbable Home" by fan writer gnimaerd (2015) revolves around the pair being engaged in something as mundane as figuring out what to name their child as Ichabod dotes over Abbie. In a comment, user notlefthanded responded, "I
reject canon and substitute yours." In "An Epilogue," written by Miss Maudlin (2013) during season 1, an overly hormonal and emotional Abbie struggles to tell Ichabod she is pregnant with their second child. The author merges Abbie’s canonical characterization (writing, for instance, "Abbie didn’t cry: she was resilient, his wife. Absurdly brave, absurdly strong, absurdly smart, absurdly funny") with the author’s own vision of Abbie’s softer, “feminine” side, depicting her as emotional, passionate, and hormonal. The fantasy of the nuclear family allows fans to maintain Abbie’s strength without sacrificing her personal life. Placing Abbie in the realm of domesticity and motherhood, fan writers subvert stereotypes of Black women as unfeminine and assertive single mothers who are too strong to keep a man (Hill Collins 2000, 76–77). These stories can be considered in relation to Scodari’s (2012) observation that disruptions to canonical narratives are almost exclusively framed in relation to gender and sexuality. As these stories show, the content of Sleepy Hollow fan fiction reflects writers’ own investments in transforming images of Black women as controlling.

[3.8] Despite this counter-hegemonic stance, fan fiction is valuable for Sleepy Hollow producers because it keeps fans engaged with the series. When fans produce extratextual content for free, they extend the world of the fictional universe and make the show more interactive and exciting for themselves and other viewers (Andrejevic 2008). Fan activities work to construct a social community around the series that deepens the emotional bonds viewers have with on-screen characters (Bourdée and Lozano Delmar 2016). Further, fans provide free promotion for television programs as they share and circulate content on social media. Whereas fan fiction tends to work alongside industry efforts, the following sections explore the potential for fan activities to subvert industry objectives.

4. #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter: Fan critique of black female archetypes

[4.1] In season 2, Ichabod and Abbie’s platonic relationship persists as a slew of new disruptions avert a potential romance. Initially, Ichabod’s wife Katrina serves as an obstacle, and later, after Ichabod kills his wife to save Abbie, two more white love interests appear in season 3. All three of his temporary love interests are variations of the fair, damsel-in-distress character type: Caroline the Revolutionary War reenactor, Zoe the historian, and a retconned “Rambo” Betsy Ross. What’s more, the narrative shifts focus from Abbie and Ichabod as co-leads in season 1 to Ichabod as protagonist in season 2. As fan writer Jennifer Munoz (2016b) states, "During the course of season two, Abbie’s narrative and involvement within the story slowly began to dwindle down to single episodes. Almost to the point that Abbie's character was only there to provide aid to Ichabod wherever he was in danger then fade off into the background once again." If season 1 portrays Abbie as a strong, emotional, and driven co-lead, season 2 relegates her to the background to serve as Ichabod’s devoted sidekick. In the spring of 2015, in response to Abbie’s diminished romantic potential and stunted character development, fans created the hashtag #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter. This social media campaign illustrates the ways fans understand Abbie’s characterization in relation to the historical stereotypes of Black women as caring Mammies and desexualized Strong Black Women.

[4.2] Fans point out that Abbie’s character development fits the Mammy stereotype as her character is consigned to serving and enabling Ichabod and Katrina. In season 2, when Katrina is brought to the present day and reunited with her son, Abbie’s character suffers at the expense of their family drama. She provides the couple with a cabin in the woods, houses them, and pays for utilities as they get reacquainted. In the episode entitled "Deliverance," Abbie even helps deliver a demon spawning inside Katrina. Fan Nichole Perkins observes that "Abbie has devolved into the dehumanizing stereotype of Black womanhood: the Mammy. Her character is now more of a desexed caretaker, constantly making sacrifices so others can have a better life" (2016). The Mammy, an archetype for a Black woman who works as an "obedient domestic servant" for a white family, emerged during US slavery to ensure Black women’s subordinate relationship to elite white male power (Hill Collins 2000, 72). Since then, the stereotype has persisted to justify the ongoing employment of Black women in domestic service. The Mammy image lives on in pop culture imaginings of professional Black women who care for white people, and who are punished if they do not appear warm and submissive (73). To render Black women harmless in their places of employment, the Mammy is stripped of sexual impulses as she invests her physical and emotional labor in her job. While the Mammy has historically been depicted as an unattractive, overweight caregiver to white families, her outward appearance has been updated of late, allowing even a slim, conventionally attractive woman like Abbie to fall into that categorization.

[4.3] A modern incarnation of the Mammy stereotype is the Strong Black Woman, imagined as self-sacrificing and asexual. While the myth of the Strong Black Woman may appear to celebrate Black women’s strength, it trades on the
assumption that Black women can withstand the worst conditions without assistance. The Strong Black Woman is superhuman; she can do whatever it takes to survive while putting the needs of others above her own. As Abbie is set up to make sacrifice after sacrifice—sacrificing her love life, her time, and her well-being for those around her with no equal return—the myth of the Strong Black Woman endures. For most of the show’s run, Abbie is trapped in a cycle of lovelessness and ghosts of boyfriends past. Many men come and go in her life, and the feelings of her past boyfriends were mostly unrequited. Potential beaus do appear in season 2, like artifacts dealer Nick Hawley (Matt Barr); however, they quickly disappear, never to be seen again. In season 3, FBI director Daniel Reynolds (Lance Gross) appears as an old flame looking to reconcile with Abbie. Since her supernatural mission has mentally exhausted her, the narrative arc surrounding Abbie’s ability to return those feelings is reduced to a slow crawl. Overall, *Sleepy Hollow* writers imply that Abbie is the problem in her failed relationships and suggest she is not a viable romantic partner for someone like Ichabod. Despite Abbie’s repeated sacrifices for Ichabod, she remains unworthy of him. She gives her whole self to the people she loves, but the audience is made to believe that, for some reason, she is not capable of receiving.

[4.4] For many Black female fans, the sidelining of Abbie represents long-held stereotypes about Black women in popular culture. As Tumblr user Annierra (2016) posits, "The center of the series was Abbie Mills/Nicole Beharie. She was the audience. She was us...As a Black woman, I don’t see myself anymore in it. Abbie is not the help for Crane, for her white male partner. I am not the help. Abbie has her own identity outside of Crane...The show is not about Ichabod Crane/Tom Mison. It was never just about him." Fans also used the aforementioned hashtag #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter to critique Abbie’s role as a caretaker. *Sleepy Hollow* fan Justine Carter (2016a) explains that "#AbbieMillsDeservesBetter because she fought alongside Ichabod for 3 years yet was told she was just his help in the end @sleepywriters." Similarly Twitter user CB (2016) critiques the devaluation of women of color (WOC), writing, "#AbbieMillsDeservesBetter than to be denied in her own partnership what WOC so often are: equality. Unique, #SleepyHollow? Nope. Familiar."

[4.5] The care work of the mythic Mammy figure also involves sacrificing her own needs for the demands of the white family. For instance, when Abbie goes back in time to Sleepy Hollow, New York, in 1781 to save Ichabod from his evil witch wife, she is jailed as a fugitive slave ("The Awakening"). Throughout the second and third seasons fans noticed that Abbie was sidelined as Ichabod’s characterization progressed. Fans used the hashtag #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter to call out writers’ overuse of the sacrificial narrative and to identify Abbie’s Blackness as key to her suffering. Fans explain, "Like so many Black women we’re used for our sacrifice but no one will sacrifice for us @sleepywriters @FOXTV" (Carter 2016b) and "#AbbieMillsDeservesBetter than to be the sacrificial pawn in Ichabod’s ‘destiny’" (Munoz 2016a). These fans and many others used the Twitter hashtag to identify the sacrificial Mammy stereotype and to urge writers to develop more nuanced storylines for Abbie.

[4.6] A related strain of fan criticism revolves around the narrative placement of Abbie as a Magical Negro—a Black character with special insight who serves to aid the journey of a white main character. The Magical Negro trope has a long history in US popular culture as a stock role for a selfless mystical figure whose sole purpose is to help the white male protagonist. Twitter fan Jenéé Osterheldt (2016) expresses her frustration at the writers’ use of the trope, proclaiming, "#AbbieMillsDeservesBetter than to go from blackgirlmagic to magical negro. Put Sleepy Hollow to bed #notrope." The concept of Black girl magic was developed to "celebrate the beauty, power and resilience of Black women" (Wilson 2016), the qualities fans saw in Abbie in season 1. On Twitter, another fan (Georgi 2016) asserts, "Women do not exist just to further the plot of males! SHAME ON YOU @SleepyHollowFOX." Fan critiques address frustration with producers for reframing Abbie as a guide for Crane’s journey, to the detriment of her character development.

[4.7] Fans also expressed disappointment in Abbie’s failed love life, especially in light of Crane’s surfeit of romantic interests. Tina Franklin’s (2016) tweet explains that fans felt slighted by the arrival of new love interests for Ichabod, stating, "@SleepyHollowFOX @FOXNOW So now it can just be about Ichabod and all these other women? Snooore. No, thank you. #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter." Similarly, Miss Curly Fro (2016) expressed her dissatisfaction by using the side-eye emoji: "Like we’ve been through Crane’s failed marriage and two or three girlfriends [two side-eye emojis] #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter." For these fans, Ichabod’s love interests are not simply a distraction from the potential romantic pairing of Abbie and Ichabod. Instead, fans see this disparity through the intersectional lenses of racism and sexism. For instance, fans suggest that Abbie is ruled out as a romantic partner by virtue of not being Ichabod’s “type.” In other words, they noticed that all Ichabod’s love interests were white women. Sharon (2016) of *Black Girl Nerds* observes, "It reminded me that you can throw a blonde girl on screen with any white guy and the general audience will
not question the eventuality of a romantic relationship, but when the woman the (white) male lead is sharing intimate
moments with is Black, then suddenly it's up for debate."

[4.8] This trend is not new or unique to Sleepy Hollow; there are contemporary analogs on other genre shows across
networks, including Iris West on the CW's The Flash (2014–) and Michonne on AMC's The Walking Dead, who have all
faced similar obstacles to romantic love and comprehensive characterization. Like Abbie, these African American
women are often pushed aside by non-Black female love interests who are more readily legitimized by showrunners
and fans. Even when Black women are cast as the primary romantic interests for white men, like Iris West in The Flash,
there can be significant pushback from fans. White consumers and creators, Johnson (2015, 261) avers, uncritically
reproduce the cultural myth of white cisgender heterosexual male superiority while perpetuating images of controlling
Black women. Sleepy Hollow fans recognized that Abbie’s lack of love interests reinforced the toxic Strong Black Woman
stereotype that normalizes the desexualization of dark-skinned women in media. Women of color recognized
themselves in Abbie, and never got to see her in a fully developed intimate relationship. Instead, fans saw a character
who was too closed off and emotionally stunted to let herself be vulnerable.

[4.9] In fans’ social media posts, they strategically use the hashtag #SleepyHollow to ensure their views appear in
searches for the TV series, and use #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter to aggregate opposition to Abbie’s stereotypical
representation. In this way, the targeted campaign reaches a broad audience while also driving attention to their
critique through Twitter algorithms that recognize trending hashtags on the site homepage. Many fans use the @
symbol to link their critiques to the official Sleepy Hollow Twitter account (@SleepyHollowFOX), the writers’ room
(@sleepywriters), and the Fox TV network (@FOXTV). This practice serves to amplify their critique of stereotypical
representations and ensures industry executives receive their demands for better roles.

[4.10] While these strategies do more to resist race and gender hierarchies in representation and target audiences,
this feedback remains valuable to producers. As Mark Andrejevic (2008, 25) explains, sites of fan discourse "can serve as
an impromptu focus group, providing instant feedback to plot twists and the introduction of new characters even as
they help to imbue the show with the kind of 'stickiness' coveted in the online world by creating a virtual community as
an added component of the show." Even when fan feedback is not positive, it gives writers a chance to right wrongs, as
showrunner Mark Goffman claimed he would do with Abbie’s character before leaving the series (Busis 2014). At the
very least, active fan resistance builds communities around a show that serve to extend viewer engagement.

5. #CancelSleepyHollow: Fan resistance and social media activism

[5.1] After season 2, showrunner Mark Goffman spoke with Entertainment Weekly about producers’ relationship with
fans, saying that he welcomed passionate viewer feedback and "actually engage[d] in [fan-producer] dialogue" (quoted
in Busis 2014). When asked about the #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter hashtag, Goffman assured fans that writers were
"very engaged in the social media atmosphere" and were devising an exciting narrative arc for Abbie in season 3. “Just
trust us,” he insisted (quoted in Busis 2014). Even though Goffman left the series after season 2 ended, it is not
surprising that Abbie’s unexpected death at the end of season 3 left fans reeling. On social media, fans explained they
felt manipulated by producers who had teased a relationship between Ichabod and Abbie and used it to keep fans
devoted to the series. By failing to respond to fan demands, producers undermined fans’ faith in the series and
effectively prompted a backlash. After Abbie’s death, two fan campaigns emerged: one under the hashtag
#CancelSleepyHollow, to reduce viewership and ratings, and another using #IAmAbbieMills, to support Black women in
the television industry. In these campaigns, fans used social media as a public sphere to promote intersectional analysis
and direct action to change representations and industrial working conditions for Black women.

[5.2] In the television industry, executives increasingly engage with fans on social media to encourage brand loyalty
and mine conversations for consumer feedback. As Mark Andrejevic (2008, 24) explains, "Online viewer activity doubles
as a form of value-enhancing labor for television producers in two ways: by allowing fans to take on part of the work of
making a show interesting for themselves and by providing instant...feedback to producers." While Sleepy Hollow fans
provided this labor—developing compelling stories in Ichabbie fan fic and providing concrete feedback through
#AbbieMillsDeservesBetter posts—their work was not rewarded. Or, as fan robsberry (2016) states, "No one listened."
In response, fans turned their collective energy to getting the series canceled.
After Abbie’s shocking death, fans used social media to air their grievances with the show under the #AbbieMillsDeservesBetter and #CancelSleepyHollow hashtags. They even got the tags trending on Twitter, an impressive feat for a show with a relatively small following (Cheng 2016). Early reactions employed gifs and emojis to express widespread confusion and grief. However, as weeks stretched on, leading up to the potential renewal of the show for a fourth season, fans became increasingly critical, calling for its cancellation. In the following months, fans used social media to hound producers, executives, actors, and writers on the show for updates on the series’ renewal status. Ultimately, fans decided to boycott the show by refusing to watch upcoming seasons. Twitter user Qrtr4Thoughts (2016) posted, "I am still livid #sleepyhollow killed #abbiemills #abbiemillsdeservesbetter not watching S4," and Justina M. Ashley (2016) posted, "#SleepyHollow getting renewed is some straight up bullshit. I will not watch & will tell others not to watch. #abbiemillsdeservesbetter." As fans’ frustration mounted, their social media strategies evolved from engaging with the show and trying to influence the narrative to boycotting the series.

Suzanne Scott (2013, 320) describes active fans as "rebels waging a tactical resistance," and Melissa Brough and Sangita Shresthova (2012, ¶ 2.3) define fan activism as “fan-driven efforts to address civic or political issues through engagement with and strategic deployment of popular culture content.” There is a long history of fan activism around television programming, with efforts focusing on keeping a show on the air, lobbying for a romantic pairing, and changing representations of race, gender, or sexuality. Famous instances include letter-writing campaigns to keep Star Trek and popular soap operas on the air in the 1960s (Earl and Kimport 2009) and more recent protests about "racebending," casting white actors to play characters who were originally understood as people of color (Lopez 2011). But not all fans seek nonwhite media representations, as evidenced by the social media backlash to the casting of African American actors like John Boyega in The Force Awakens and Leslie Jones in Ghostbusters. While many scholars have theorized the ways fannish engagement may translate into political action (Jenkins [1992] 2013; Lopez 2011; van Zoonen 2004), we are interested in the ways fan activism can disrupt the media industry. By not watching, Sleepy Hollow fans affected a media company’s ability to profit from viewer ratings, social media feedback, and creative productions. Sleepy Hollow fans framed their refusal to watch as an intersectional critique of the treatment of Black women on TV. A writer on the fan website Fan Girl Uprising avers,

Black women, who were the biggest supporters of this show, are so tired of this shit. Tired of terrific Black women characters dying to service the white guys story line. Tired of Black women getting tossed aside like a used drink cup by insensitive white show runners, even when they’re integral to the show. Tired of being erased. It’s more than just this one death, it’s a whole freaking lifetime of being told by society that Black women Don’t Matter. It’s all the deaths, all the times the Black woman died to service someone else’s story line piling up until fans suffocate under it. (swwoman 2016)

These sentiments were echoed on Twitter by fans like Kim Richardson (2016), who posted, "I will never go back. The disrespect shown to Abbie and Nicole is unforgivable. #CancelSleepyHollow." Many tweets assessed the state of fan-producer relations and speculated that the creative team was out of touch with the actively engaged portion of their fan base. For a majority of female fans and fans of color, their attraction to the show was their connection to Abbie and the pleasure of seeing her in a leading role. So when co-creator Phillip Iscove (2016) tweeted, "I know you guys are upset but please try and remember I’m still a human being. Words have power," Sanna Olson (2016) suggested, "Maybe you should try to understand WHY people are so upset." On Twitter, user The Notorious R.O.B. (2016a, 2016b) responded, "Put yourself in the WOC’s shoes, and watch through the lens of [the] person who constantly gets erased"; "You will see just how damaging it is to see yet another stellar WOC get erased AGAIN."

Another campaign launched by Sleepy Hollow fans addressed the treatment of actress Nicole Beharie and, by extension, Black women in the entertainment industry. Using the hashtag #IAmAbbieMills, fans came to Beharie’s defense through an outpouring of love and support. Fans praised her acting and the nuance she brought to Abbie’s character as well as the importance of seeing Black women on television. Twitter user AicylA (@MissIVY_League) explains that she launched the hashtag to show that: "Nicole brings that strength to life in every character she plays. I’ve seen so much from Abbie that’s a reflection of me" (2016). The hashtag is meant to serve as a tool "for Black women and others that connected with Beharie’s character to share how being represented on screen is about more than fandom, or vanity, but about worth" (Hobbs 2016). Fans felt that when creators neglected Abbie’s character, they degraded her value on the show and alienated that population of fans for whom Abbie served as an analog.
Fans also used the #IAmAbbieMills hashtag to show solidarity with Beharie by sharing their own experiences with racism and sexism. On Twitter, Leslie Mac (2016) posted, "I am a Black Woman who has been hired to lead & then relegated to the background. #IAmAbbieMills," and Indigo Sky Tomato (2016) said, "#IAmAbbieMills because I’m brainy, unconventional, and outspoken, but front to guard my [heart emoji] because the world isn’t kind to women like me." For many Black women, Abbie Mills proved not just a source of identification, but also a representation of the intersection of systemic racism and sexism they had also experienced. This discourse led fans to a broader critique of racism and sexism in the television industry. Fans further protested by leveraging their consumer power, as evidenced by ReBecca Theodore-Vachon, who tweeted, "my viewership and my coins are here for @NikkiBeharie and whatever projects she has coming up. #SleepyHollow is dead to me" (2016). Fans also created and sold #IAmAbbieMills t-shirts through Booster.com, with proceeds contributed to Black Girls Rock, an organization that empowers and provides resources to Black women.

Fan resistance emerged, in part, because Sleepy Hollow fans felt overlooked in favor of a whiter and more male audience. Fox has an institutional history of courting and dismissing Black viewers. Kristal Zook (1999) explains that Fox grew to prominence in the late 1980s and early 1990s by targeting Black viewers with Black-produced programming and then, after acquiring Sunday Night Football in 1994, swiftly jettisoned Black series to focus on the more desirable white male audience. Fox’s current priorities are revealed by CEO Dana Walden’s celebration of Mison, Sleepy Hollow’s white male lead, and easy dismissal of Abbie’s role in the series. In an interview with TV Line, Walden maintains, "What we know is that Tom Mison is a big star. And the Ichabod Crane character has been so central to the series and the storytelling and he feels like an original, big Fox character." She goes on to say that Beharie’s departure does not have to be "the end of the life of the show" (quoted in Ausiello 2016). Network executives’ appraisal of Mison as the linchpin of the narrative reaffirms white male centrality and suggests the network’s prioritization of white viewers. Conversely, the network’s decision to replace Beharie with a new character played by another actress of color (Janina Gavankar) demonstrates the devaluation of women of color. This inference is reiterated by former Sleepy Hollow star Orlando Jones (2016), an African American actor who was also booted from the show, in a tweet that affirms, "The white male lead should totally sacrifice his life to protect the *dark skinned* black girl! said no development executive EVER." Fans like Monique11 (2016) draw a similar conclusion; she tweeted, "They bully a talented Black actress off the show to cater to a white er audience and are rewarded with a 4th season? Not surprised."

6. Conclusion

Over the course of three seasons, Sleepy Hollow’s dedicated fan base used social media to launch an intersectional critique and urge change in the industry. Their efforts involved writing fan fiction, calling out stereotypical representations, and boycotting the show. While these initial tactics inadvertently benefited media industries by helping promote the show and providing free market research, the fandom collectively changed its approach after season 3 and set its sights on boycotting the series. In protest, fans no longer produced a stream of content that could be mined and appropriated by the network. In its fourth season, Sleepy Hollow saw a steady decline in ratings, from upward of 8 million viewers in season 1 to an average of 1.91 million viewers in February 2017 (Deadline Team 2014; Mitovich 2017). While this shift can be attributed in part to the fact that the show had been moved to a quieter Friday night timeslot, fans felt that they played a role in the show’s demise. In May 2017 Fox announced that the show had been canceled, and fans took to social media to celebrate by throwing a virtual party using the hashtag #SleepyHollowIsOverParty. Amid the digital festivities, fans continued to demand industry recognition: Twitter user Curious Maverick (2017) wrote, "I hope current and future showrunners are seeing the reaction to #SleepyHollowIsOverParty and taking notes on what NOT to do to their shows." While the potential for social TV to alter institutional power dynamics remains to be seen, Sleepy Hollow fans’ evolving strategies show how organized actions can subvert institutional efforts to monetize fan engagement.

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Abstract—Since the emergence in the 1970s of the ABC Afterschool Special series, networks have sought to distance themselves from the what critics saw as the crass, shallow spectacle of mainstream television. Indeed, contemporary teen programming increasingly rejects black-and-white messages and didacticism in favor of provoking discussion both within the text and online. How, then, do "very special episodes" play out in an age of social TV, online fan discussion, and culturally edgy teen programming? By exploring a 2015 sexual assault story arc on ABC Family's teen drama, Switched at Birth (2011–17), and the network’s accompanying social media fan engagement, I argue that fan conversations on social media about divisive or sensitive topics have the potential to disrupt the educational messages within teen programming. ABC Family’s #SwitchedAfterChat exemplifies the ways in which fan engagement strategies that fail to adequately support online conversations surrounding sensitive or controversial topics have the potential to thwart educational messaging and to shut down lines of conversation opened by the television text itself, not only in teen programming but in television storytelling more generally.

Keywords—Cultural forum; Education; Social media; Teen TV; Television; Twitter

I. Introduction

On February 3, 2015, ABC Family (now Freeform) aired 4.05 "At First Clear Word," the second in a three-episode arc on its teen drama Switched at Birth (2011–17) addressing the issue of sexual assault on college campuses. The episode opens as Bay Kennish, one the series' two lead characters, wakes up in a dorm room, hungover and unsure of what happened the night before. The camera pans from the look of worry and confusion on her face, down to her clothes on the floor and then to the man lying next to her in bed: her ex-boyfriend, friend, and fan favorite Tank. Throughout the story arc, the show seeks not only to reflect common conversations surrounding sexual assault but also to encourage discussion about consent that goes beyond the simplistic good guy/bad guy rhetoric often seen in sexual assault plotlines across television programming. As Lizzy Weiss, the creator and showrunner of Switched at Birth, explained in interviews about the sexual assault story line, the writers set out to do a series of episodes that would "spark conversation" by keeping the plot details as "gray" as possible; they wanted to be sure not to dictate views to the audience but to allow them to wrestle with the ideological and moral implications themselves. As she told Flavorwire in an interview soon after the second episode in the arc aired: "Despite what most television says, it’s not a black-and-white matter that has a clear-cut solution at the end of the hour. The Switched at Birth writers are aware of this, and aimed to start a conversation rather than crafting a definitive account." (http://flavorwire.com/504412/we-dont-have-all-the-answers-switched-at-birth-creator-lizzy-weiss-on-the-series-campus-rape-storyline)

ABC Family and the show’s producers sought to encourage discussion provoked by the episode through network-sponsored Twitter chats with the show’s stars and writers, hashtags that appeared on-screen during the episode, Facebook posts, and a partnership with a national sexual assault support network. While television critics largely applauded the progressive perspective on campus sexual assault, with BuzzFeed arguing in its hallmark style
that it "might be the bravest show on television" ([https://www.buzzfeed.com/jacelacob/abc-family-switched-at-birth-campus-rape](https://www.buzzfeed.com/jacelacob/abc-family-switched-at-birth-campus-rape)), the online reaction of fans was divided. While some did appreciate the writers’ careful avoidance of "very special episode" tropes typical of sexual assault story lines, other fans blamed Bay for being an irresponsible tease and argued that the show’s writers were being unfair to Tank. While Weiss claimed to want to leave the answers up to the viewers and to open up room for discussion, the story arc and its ensuing social media education campaign clearly fits within the growing campaign to popularize affirmative consent and "yes means yes" as the standard for determining sexual assault ([note 1](#)). However, the still-controversial nature of this standard meant that the episode sparked a more complicated conversation than the social media campaign was designed to handle or to which it could deftly respond. It seems that while the discussion of controversial topics, in this case about college policy, gender, and sexuality, is often heralded by critics, scholars, and fans alike, these topics can also lead to unintended fan backlash that undercuts a show’s intended message. Indeed, attempts to persuade young audiences to adopt the "yes means yes" standard of consent with regard to this particular story line were somewhat blunted by the ensuing social media conversation, in which fans tended to dig in their heels along common ideological lines.

[1.3] Therefore, here I want to explore the tension between the potential for discussion opened by the provocative sexual assault story arc and the ways in which ABC Family’s social media fan engagement was not equipped to responsibly foster such a discussion. Through this case study, I want to start to think through the ways in which fans engage in debates on social media about complicated, controversial, or contentious topics opened by increasingly sophisticated teen TV and, more broadly, television in general. Such tension exists across television programming and is by no means a new problem; the intended meaning of texts and audience interpretation have always bumped up against one another. This case study is useful, though, for the ways in which it makes visible the growing tension between television programming and social media engagement; while networks continue to develop complex and socially relevant narratives that work to incite conversation, they have largely failed to develop complex social media responses to address a wide range of fan reaction. While "the very special episode" has long been a staple of television programming, narrowcasting and niche programming allows for increasingly nuanced narratives that deal with complicated issues like sexuality, suicide, bullying, racism, misogyny, and sexual assault. While these narratives indeed represent opportunities for conversation and education, they also put a strain on television networks’ ability to guide online conversations responsibly. While networks have never had control over the ways in which audiences make meaning from their programming (Hall 1980), the rise of social media engagement makes visible the varied responses audiences have in response to complex or contentious texts and brings fans’ voices together in one forum. While audience backlash or hate may be the price of online engagement for networks, in the case of increasingly sophisticated storytelling aimed at younger audiences, such backlash has the potential to undercut certain intended messages within the network’s online spaces. Thus, the educational potential of shows like *Switched at Birth* is thwarted by oppositional fan readings made increasingly visible by social media. As networks seek to attract savvy millennial fans with nuanced, socially progressive programming, network fan engagement should offer accompanying social media campaigns that responsibly guide fan conversation and, even more optimistically, push conversations in new directions. In this particular case study, while *Switched at Birth*’s sexual assault arc opened avenues for discussion about not just individual consent, but also about the societal structures and context in which Bay and Tank were making decisions, ultimately the social media campaign failed to push the conversation beyond the typical arguments about individual choices and responsibility.

[1.4] Specifically, I’m interested in the tension between education and discussion underlying both the television narrative and social media engagement. While Weiss understands *Switched at Birth* within a cultural forum framework (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983), in which the emphasis is on "the process rather than product, on discussion rather than indoctrination, on contradictions and confusion rather than coherence" (564), an educational aim also underlies the episode and the network’s branding strategy. The network and producers want to encourage discussion, but also to deliver a certain message. Discussion is, of course, an important pedagogical tool. But, as anyone who has led a classroom discussion knows, student-led discussion has the potential to take the material in unintended directions. Shows like *Switched at Birth* are often applauded for avoiding preaching and finger-wagging, but an unintended consequence of nuance, as the social media response to this episode highlights, is even less control over any fundamental lesson. *Switched at Birth*, in this case, makes visible the tricky balancing act networks face in blending educational messaging, narrative complexity, and social media engagement. This story arc in particular represents a clear case in which the creator and network acknowledged the nuance of the show’s storytelling and its educational impetus, but were not able to either handle or reflect the complexity of fan responses because of the limits of their
social media engagement. To work through the various ways in which ABC Family and the *Switched at Birth* writers tried and sometimes failed strike a responsible balance between fan engagement and sexual assault education, I first briefly discuss intersections between the literature on fan talk and Newcomb and Hirsch’s (1983) cultural forum model of television. Next, I work through the story arc itself, contextualizing it within the conventions of sexual assault in teen programming and “very special episodes.” Finally, I use Louisa Ellen Stein’s (2015) work on millennial fan practices to show how ABC Family’s #SwitchedAfterChat exemplifies the ways in which social media fan engagement has yet to catch up to the rise of complex millennial television storytelling.

2. Fan talk and education: Twitter as a classroom and cultural forum

[2.1] Platforms like Twitter increasingly give viewers across the spectrum of fan engagement—from superfans to nonviewers—the ability to participate in ongoing conversations about television with varying levels of intensity. The constantly changing ecology of social media has allowed for what Matt Hills (2002) terms “just in time fandom,” in which the practices of fandom have become “increasingly enmeshed with the rhythms and temporalities of broadcasting” (16). In other words, fans and casual viewers alike can discuss new episodes of television as they air, augmenting their viewing experience with running commentary and discussion. Twitter is still probably the most popular platform for such "just in time fandom" for both casual viewers and heavily engaged fans. While scholars like Wood and Baughman (2012) have looked at very active fan engagement through Twitter, specifically fans who create user accounts for fictional characters, others, like Highfield, Harrington, and Bruns (2012), describe the ways in which during major media events, Twitter is used as a back channel through which more "ordinary" audiences offer their own running commentary on a shared media text of the event as it unfolds. Some Twitter users read their feed as a paratext rather than participating, choosing to lurk, or silently follow the conversation as it unfolds without adding their own commentary. No matter the level of active engagement, networks see "just-in-time fandom" practices like live tweeting as a way to incentivize live-viewing and bring back live audiences easily lost to time-shifting and increased online entertainment offerings.

[2.2] Producers and network executives increasingly encourage such practices, displaying official hashtags on screen, highlighting fan tweets during broadcasts, and building interactivity into the television text itself. As Cory Barker (2014) argues in his essay on casual forms of *Pretty Little Liars* (2010–17) fandom, the increasing merging of television viewing practices with social media engagement, or social TV, not only makes established fan communities more visible and easily able to share their own content, but also motivates more casual viewer participation as well. As social media and television increasingly converge, scholars like Matt Hills (2013) and Suzanne Scott (2008) have argued that categorizations of fandom, such as the semiotic, enunciative, and textual tripartite of fan productivity outlined by John Fiske (1992), need to be constantly reimagined; however, even as fan studies scholarship reimagines fan practices, visible creative textual productivity still often receives the greatest attention. Therefore, as social TV becomes the new norm, Barker argues, fan studies scholarship should also interrogate the "brief, conversational, and less politically engaged" (215) viewer practices that are increasingly becoming another part of regular television viewing. Indeed, drawing on Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and C. Lee Harrington’s (2007) call to understand fandom “as a part of the fabric of our everyday lives” (9), Stein (2015) argues that media companies no longer fear “the excesses of the unruly fan,” but are now building television ecosystems that embrace "personal investment, performativity, emotion, and excess within the context of shared digital creativity" (15).

[2.3] In this case study, I’m interested in how social TV and these more casual forms of fandom extend the educational and cultural messaging from teen programming into online spaces through fan talk (Fiske 1992); specifically, how young fans interpret and discuss social issues through their engagement with television story lines and discussion of their favorite characters. Networks increasingly encourage conversation and engagement among fans of teen dramas—not only in an effort to attract and keep an audience but also in an effort to shift attitudes, educate, and raise awareness of often complicated and controversial issues. However, as Stuart Hall (1980) has taught us, audiences don’t always adopt a media text’s intended meaning; and further, they don’t always adopt a network campaign’s intended argument. As I dig into the Twitter and Facebook discussion surrounding ABC Family’s *Switched at Birth* sexual assault story line, it became apparent that the producers, cast, and network social media accounts had limited control over the direction of the ensuing social media conversation. This, of course, isn’t surprising. Audiences frequently express their frustration, disappointment, or anger at series’ plot or character developments. This affective reaction has more troubling implications, though, when the discussion of characters and plot development pushes
potentially harmful assumptions about, in this case, rape culture and victim blaming. In her seminal research on romance novels, Janice Radway (1984) argues that to fully understand a text within popular culture, researchers must shift their focus from the text in isolation to "the complex social event of reading," where audiences "actively attribute sense to lexical signs" in the context of their ordinary lives (8). Indeed, social media has become a key part of the television reading experience, and though "the personal and the political do not always go hand in hand" (Ang 1985, 136), social TV merits exploration in the ways in which the political is understood through personal connections to one's favorite TV characters.

[2.4] Indeed, as Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) argue, "the rhetoric of television drama is a rhetoric of discussion," and that rather than imparting a single message to the audience via a closed story line, "television does not present firm ideological conclusions," but rather "comments on ideological problems" (49). However, once fan conversation becomes itself a paratext to the television show, those debates have the potential to become a part of the message. Whereas networks could absolve themselves of responsibility for what went on in viewers' living rooms, I would argue that networks and television shows that wish to label their story lines as educational have a responsibility to reasonably guide divisive conversations within the context of official social media campaigns, especially with younger audiences. Discussion is an important aspect of education, but such discussion needs to be able to match the complexity of the text in order to push it in a productive direction.

[2.5] Additionally, in extending the cultural forum model of television to online spaces through social media engagement, ABC Family/Freeform and other networks like The CW, The Disney Channel, and, increasingly, streaming platforms like Netflix and Hulu, face difficulties in balancing the tension between encouraging fan discussion and imparting important messages to their impressionable fans. Further, in the era of social TV, it is important to examine how fan discussion on social media becomes a paratext that has the potential to disrupt or complicate educational messaging, and in the case of sexual assault, to trigger or harm fans who see themselves in the story. Switched at Birth, being a text that frequently tackles difficult social and personal issues, and that is aggressively marketed via social media, is then a useful site in which to examine the tension between entertainment, discussion, and education. In the following section, I will articulate the ways in which Switched at Birth draws on the genre conventions of teen drama to educate its audience about, in this case study, sexual assault. Next, I will explore the ways in which ABC Family's social media campaign failed to adequately extend this conversation online, by using Stein’s (2015) theorization of network branding and millennial fan practices.

3. Switched at Birth's sexual assault story line

[3.1] Switched at Birth premiered on ABC Family in the summer of 2011 and as of this writing is airing its fifth and final season on the since renamed Freeform network. The show follows two teenagers in Kansas City, Bay (Vanessa Marano) and Daphne (Katie Leclerc), as they deal with the fallout of discovering they were brought home by the wrong families from the hospital where they were born on the same day. Like other Freeform series, the show deals with a range of issues facing teenagers specifically, and broader issues like race, class, and sexuality. Bay's "adoptive" family, the Kennishes, resides in a wealthy, mostly white suburb, while Daphne's "adoptive" Latina single mother and grandmother are from a multicultural, working class neighborhood. Most notably, the show has been both praised and critiqued for its treatment of ability and ableism, as Daphne and a large portion of the secondary cast are deaf and many scenes are shot primarily in American Sign Language. Switched at Birth draws both on soap opera conventions and "quality television" conventions in ways that mark the series as both entertainingly dramatic and culturally and socially relevant. These strategies, similarly seen on shows like The Fosters (Freeform) and Degrassi (Netflix, in its most recent incarnation) allow networks to differentiate their programming from so-called mindless or harmful teen programming. Educational and socially relevant content has often been a branding strategy through which networks can distance themselves from the competition in terms of quality. For instance, the emergence in the 1970s of the ABC Afterschool Special series, one of the first examples of "edutainment" for teenagers, exemplified the ways in which networks sought to distance themselves from the what critics saw as the crass, shallow spectacle of mainstream television (Elman 2010, 261–62). However, contemporary prestige programming, even for teens, increasingly rejects black and white messages or didacticism in favor of raising questions and provoking discussion both within the text and online (Ross 2008, 75).
As Weiss told the press, she and her writers were hoping to bring such nuance to the campus sexual assault story arc. While many television series, from family sitcoms to adult dramas, have tackled the issue of sexual assault, they often do so in special episodes, contained story lines, or in a single Law and Order–style "ripped from the headlines" episode. Rarely do series build a story about sexual assault into the "constellation of pre-existing characters and ongoing, intertwined narratives" that soap opera storytelling allows (Treichler 2007, 108). Further, Susan Berridge (2013) argues that while female-centered teen drama series are more likely to center on the victims' experiences, challenge representations, and encourage discussion about socially sensitive topics like sexual assault, often "sexual violence narratives across the teen genre contain rather than enlarge discussions about the relationship between gender, sexuality, and power" (482). The Switched at Birth writers acknowledge this trend and wanted to open discussion where they saw it often being shut down.

This brings us to the story line at hand, which took place in the show's fourth season. The groundwork for the three-episode assault story arc was laid starting in season 3 with fallout continuing into the present fifth season. My analysis focuses on the three episodes from the fourth season immediately leading up to and following the assault, which aired from January 27, 2015, to February 10, 2015: 4.04 "We Were So Close that Nothing Used to Stand Between Us," 4.05 "At First Clear Word," and 4.06 "Black and Gray." By this point in the series, Daphne and Bay are college aged, although for complicated reasons (because in teen dramas, aren't they always?) Daphne is enrolled in the fictional University of Missouri–Kansas City while Bay has recently been released from house arrest and is enjoying her first days of freedom from her ankle bracelet. Bay has recently had a fight with her long-distance boyfriend, Emmet (Sean Berdy), and is attending a party at her friend's dorm to blow off steam. At the party, she runs into her friend and ex-boyfriend Tank (Max Adler). Episode 4.04 ends with Bay drinking alcoholic punch, or "jungle juice," with Tank at the dorm party, and episode 4.05 opens with Bay waking up naked in a dorm room and finding Tank asleep next to her (figure 1).

Leading up to this point, the show has already laid the groundwork for a more complicated portrayal of sexual assault than we generally see on TV. While many sexual assault story lines on television feature marginal perpetrators characterized as "bad" or "othered" from the "good" male members of the main cast (Berridge 2013, 483), the audience has gotten to know Tank for an entire season. He is not a suspicious stranger or a bad guy; he is Bay's very close friend, her brother's roommate and a character that members of the audience likely identify with. Indeed, Weiss told Cosmopolitan that the network was initially surprised that they wanted to use Tank for this arc, but as she explained, "We were very clear that we wanted to tell a story with a character that you knew and loved. People [had] a hard time even from the promo!" (http://www.cosmopolitan.com/entertainment/tv/g-and-a/a36073/switched-at-birth-campus-sexual-assault-lizzy-weiss-interview/). Further, the audience is never shown exactly what happened the night before, with Bay and Tank offering different accounts of what happened at the party. Bay explains that she was too drunk to consent to sex, while Tank insists that she said yes and he had no way of knowing she had blacked out. Weiss noted in her Flavorwire interview that they purposely chose to show differing accounts from each character's perspective to mimic common real-life situations in which no one ever knows exactly and objectively what happened.

Berridge (2013) argues that teen drama's tendency toward large casts and a focus on relationships allows for them to put the actual discussion of sexual violence at the center of these types of story lines. Often within discussions between characters, writers can "self-consciously deploy rape myths to then interrogate them" (482). Indeed, the show uses various character reactions to Bay's confiding in them about what happened to her to highlight common reactions to sexual assault. For instance, after Bay wakes up, she is upset because she thinks she cheated on her boyfriend.
Emmet; however, she has a nagging feeling that something else is wrong, so she confides in her birth mother Regina (Constance Marie) later that night, pretending that she’s asking the question for a friend:

[3.6] Bay: Actually, Tess has a boyfriend, a pretty serious one. I think she loves him a lot. But, I guess last night, she got really drunk. Like, smashed. And when she woke up this morning, she found out that she had sex with someone else, but she doesn’t remember it. Nothing. Blackout. Does that count as cheating? I mean, does she have to tell her boyfriend?

Regina: Well that’s awful.

Bay: That she cheated.

Regina: No, that she was raped.

Bay: What?

Regina: Well if she was so drunk that she couldn’t remember it the next day, then she didn’t give consent.

Bay: Right.

Regina: Well, in my opinion. In a lot of people’s opinions.

Bay: But she wasn’t passed out. And what if she did give consent, but she just doesn’t remember it?

Regina: If she said yes, but she said it when she was that wasted, the guy should not have had sex with her period.

Bay: I don’t know that I agree with you. But thank you. I’ll tell her.

[3.7] In this conversation, Regina’s character is used to interrogate the myths that Bay believes about sexual assault. These types of conversations happen between nearly every member of the cast, giving voice to the range of reactions that are typically offered surrounding sexual assault from “it isn’t a victim’s fault if they are raped,” to “if both people are drunk, it isn’t assault” to “women shouldn’t play victims.” Though a wide range of opinions are offered across the cast, the show ultimately makes the argument that “yes means yes” and affirmative consent is required for sex in all circumstances, pushing back against characters that claim otherwise. The use of talk and emotional reaction in teen dramas means that consent and assault are discussed repeatedly as a central plot point, allowing the show to not only reflect common conversations about rape, but also to educate the audience, and help viewers work out their own knowledge, ideas, and feelings.

[3.8] The show goes beyond discussion of sexual assault as an individual issue and attempts to address campus policies surrounding student sexual assault. Thanks to the teen drama trope in which all adults connected to the teen characters work at the school their kids and their friends attend, Bay is able to discuss college policies with her boyfriend’s mother, Melody (Marlee Matlin), who is the administrator of the deaf program and the dorm where the party took place. By the end of episode 4.05, Bay is sure that something isn’t right and has confided in Daphne and her brother. Because of the interconnectedness of the characters on the show, this means that in the opening scene of 4.06, Melody has found out about the assault and calls Bay into her office to discuss a potential investigation. In this scene Melody explains what Title IX is and how the school will investigate the events of the party. This scene complicates the story, because Melody is Bay’s boyfriend’s mom, and also serves as an educational moment, because Melody is the first one to bring up Title IX, what it is, and how it affects university responses to sexual assault on campus (figure 2).
While sexual violence in teen dramas and on television in general is often framed as an individual crime rather than a systemic political issue (Berridge 2013, 482), here the show tries to broaden the scope of the discussion beyond interpersonal relationships. Additionally, teen drama’s use of serialization means that the emotional aftermath can play out over multiple episodes or even seasons. At the end of episode 4.06, Bay ultimately decides to tell the university investigators about what happened to her, confronts Tank about her decision, and finds out that Tank will be expelled from school. This episode closes one chapter of the story, but it sets in motion an emotional aftermath that will play out over a long period of time, just as it does for real-life survivors.

With this episode and with the ensuing online conversation, the writers and the network wanted to push the narrative about sexual assault beyond the commonsensical, mistaken impression that rape is only perpetrated by strangers or bad guys and to update long-held standards of consent. As Newcomb and Hirsch argue (1983), television shows that make the best use of the medium as a cultural forum “raise the forum/discussion to an intense and obvious level” not only dealing subtextually with contemporary issues, but actively raising questions and commenting on them (49). Rather than simply reflecting common-sense notions of sexual assault, Switched at Birth sought to move the conversation in a new direction; however, the conversation tended to fall along well-worn lines when it moved to Facebook, Reddit, and Twitter. While many TV critics and those who already agreed with Switched at Birth’s stance on consent and assault applauded the story line, those fans who were uncomfortable with the direction of the story line were vocal in their discontent in ways that the online campaign was ill-equipped to deal with. In the next section, I’ll explore the ways in which online fan practices have the potential to hinder potentially progressive conversation surrounding controversial issues without adequate scaffolding or support from those leading such conversations.

4. Millennial network branding and fan engagement

As television outlets have proliferated through cable and streaming services, programming, both for adults and teens, has increasingly explored controversial and sensitive issues. Simultaneously, online fandom and social media engagement surrounding television has also proliferated, thus raising questions as to the role of online fan discussions of such sensitive topics. While audiences have always differed in their interpretation and reaction to television programming, how does the ability to put these opinions in a public forum change the potential of television messaging? How do and how should networks guide fan conversation, particularly with regard to programming for teens and young adults about important and potentially triggering issues? Stein (2015) traces the evolution of the types of network branding and millennial fan practices that characterized the hybrid educational/marketing strategy ABC Family took in conjunction with the Switched at Birth sexual assault arc. In her work, she interrogates the ways in which traditional modes of fan practice have become conflated with millennial modes of media consumption. Stein specifically addresses ABC Family’s rebrand in 2007 in which the network introduced its tagline “A New Kind of Family” as a way to attract millennial viewers turned off by the idea of traditional, conservative family programming. This audience was interested in the “edginess of youth culture” but still wanted the “safety of family values” (16). The network therefore worked to emphasize the edginess of its shows’ narrative content but also the transmedia elements of its series and opportunities for digital engagement. In 2007, this meant marketing the ABC Family website as a place fans could engage with the shows while sharing their own videos and stories about family and friends (17); ten years later, digital engagement has shifted from the ABC Family website to Freeform’s social media accounts. The switch to the name Freeform is the logical conclusion to the 2007 rebranding. By dropping the term "Family" from the network name, execs hope they can attract casual viewers who still associate the word with wholesome, traditional values. The 2016 press release announcing the switch referred to ABC Family as the “most social television network”; and indeed, the network
relaunched with a daylong virtual event on Twitter, Periscope, Vine, and BuzzFeed, as well as a live Facebook chat, Instagram content, and a Pretty Little Liars Snapchat filter. The fan base cultivated by ABC Family and now Freeform is tech savvy and engaged with the network’s shows across social media platforms, in spaces that are both official and unofficial.

[4.2] Newcomb and Hirsch (1983) argue that television producers and executives are cultural interpreters that "read the culture" through its relation to the market, an argument that can be extended to marketing departments (53). At the same time, audiences bring their own background and personal beliefs to their reading of a text. While this process has always taken place, convergence culture increasingly makes these conversations visible across media platforms and across time and space (Jenkins 2006). As Matt Hills (2013) notes, fan activities and relationships have changed with shifting technologies and the "democratization of production" (130). While fan discussion may once have been limited to living rooms and friend groups, fan talk in the form of live tweeting and Facebook comments no longer "exists only for its moment of speaking" (Fiske 1992, 39) but rather is reproducible, circulatable, and public. However, while social media engagement increasingly allows for conversations around controversial narratives to take place among fans, the mutually negotiated process of reading, creating, and interpreting culture is a complex process that social media platforms, fans, and network social media managers often have trouble navigating. Further, the potential pitfalls of social media fan talk merit additional attention when debates about the realities of sexual assault and consent are intertwined with discussions about character and plot.

[4.3] To explore the potential for both productive and destructive discussion surrounding sensitive story lines, I examined the Twitter and Facebook conversations held within official spaces leading up to and following episodes 4.04 through 4.06. Over the course of these episodes, the show’s producers harnessed the existing social media publicity infrastructure of both ABC Family and Switched at Birth, using the network’s and series’ social media accounts to publicize the official conversation the show’s stars and writers would lead on Twitter during and after episode 4.05 about consent and sexual assault (figure 3).

Figure 3. The Switched at Birth official Twitter handle promotes #SwitchedAfterChat for 4.05 "At First Clear Word" (2015). [View larger image.]

[4.4] They also enlisted the help of Break The Cycle, a nonprofit that runs dating abuse programs for young people. Break the Cycle’s Twitter handle also publicized its involvement leading up to the episode (figure 4).
While I directly quote all official Twitter handles, I include no identifying information of viewers and fans on Facebook and Twitter. Instead, I’ll just try to summarize general trends. To find conversations, I searched the official hashtags #SwitchedAfterChat, #SwitchedatBirth, and #BaysDecision from January 25 to February 17 to capture conversation both leading up to and reacting to the episodes under examination. I also read through Facebook comments on the official Switched at Birth page’s promotional post made immediately after 4.05 aired (February 4, 2015). Because of all the promotional posts from the season, this one received the most comments and sparked the most debate among commenters (figure 5).

An examination of this social media campaign shows ABC Family’s reliance on its usual transmedia branding strategies to both foster conversation and educate its viewers on sexual assault and consent faced three sometimes contradictory challenges: (1) network branding strategies often undercut the seriousness of sensitive issues and story lines; (2) the story opened potential discussion that was limited by official social media engagement; and (3) despite attempts at limitation, social media accounts weren’t able to adequately push back problematic assumptions about sexual assault and consent.

Before getting into the online discussion itself, I want to note the uneasy relationship between network social media engagement strategies and sexual assault education present in the airing of these episodes. While the promotion of the Switched After-Chat pushed the partnership of ABC Family with nonprofits like Break the Cycle, indicating the seriousness of the discussion, the displaying of on-screen hashtags during the episode tended to undercut the real-life trauma that sexual assault victims face. ABC Family, and now Freeform, will often promote episodes with hashtags about a major upcoming plot point. This hashtag then displays on screen during pivotal moments during episodes to encourage, organize, and track social media conversation surrounding certain plotlines. In this case, however, because the typical dramatic beats of a teen drama were tied up with the difficult and raw experience of sexual assault, the use of pithy hashtags for promotion felt inappropriate. One of the most disquieting examples was the use of the hashtag #BaysDecision, leading up to and during the conversation between Bay and Tank in 4.06 "Black and Gray" when Bay explains that she’s decided to cooperate with the Title IX investigation against Tank (figure 6).
[4.8] While encouraging fans to discuss and work through their likely complicated feelings about the episode, the direct application of branding strategies to an educational plotline about young people and sexual assault starts to reveal the ways in which the social media marketing infrastructure isn’t designed to adequately guide such a precarious discussion.

[4.9] Moving to the online fan activity itself, the network's aim was and still is to cultivate the correct type of fans, ones who are "willing to go the extra mile in terms of textual investment yet happy to play within the officially demarcated lines"(18). Stein argues that ABC Family essentially sought to domesticate fan behavior by merging it with millennial viewer practices. The network needs to harness online fandom in order to bolster its brand without encouraging any behavior too far outside of the mainstream and to attract viewers who are media savvy yet still "malleable for advertisers" (18). This means that while the episode itself may have opened possibilities for the discussion of sexual assault, the official Twitter engagement stuck to a constrained set of talking points, even when faced with complicated questions or pushback from fans. The merging of educational talking points with the needs of millennial brand engagement led to stilted and scripted conversations that rarely moved beyond the repetition of the need for "clear, affirmative consent" in sexual situations. Although Weiss claims she wanted to "spark conversation" and let fans come to their own conclusions about the story, the official message of both the episode and the Twitter campaign led by the show’s stars and writers guided fans to take away a single, specific message: that Bay wasn’t at fault for Tank's having sex with her while she was drunk. Figure 7 illustrates a typical exchange.

[4.10] Furthermore, while both the episode and the ensuing social media conversation sought to shift the onus of responsibility from the victim to the perpetrator by emphasizing that "yes means yes," the social media campaign failed
further the episode’s conversation about the wider cultural, political, and social ideologies that lead to campus rape culture. This is the main area in which the media text and social media paratexts diverge. While the episode tried to invoke wider systems of power in its portrayal of sexual assault, the online chat largely framed sexual assault as an issue between two individuals. Networks may be able to distance themselves somewhat from controversial storytelling within their series, but online network branding, publicity, and legal concerns likely necessitate that ABC Family’s social media accounts avoid saying anything controversial, complicated, or combative. Even—perhaps especially—surrounding complex and divisive subjects, official accounts need to place boundaries around fan discussion. ABC Family’s social media campaign seemed comfortable educating its audience about individual responsibility in cases of rape and sexual assault, but less comfortable addressing the societal ideologies and systems undergirding campus rape culture or in educating fans who were not already on board with affirmative consent or the existence of rape culture. This is the clearest example of the ways in which the goals of the series did not necessarily align with the goals of the network. Further, it highlights the ways in which Switched at Birth sits at an uneasy intersection of cultural forum, educational text, and network property.

[4.11] When fans did ask complicated questions, tried to engage in debate, or pushed back against talking points, official accounts directed them to seek further information from Break The Cycle’s (https://www.breakthecycle.org/blog/back-school-defining-consent-sexual-relationships) and Love Is Respect’s (http://www.loveisrespect.org/healthy-relationships/what-consent/) websites, two organizations that emphasize affirmative consent and constant communication within sexual relationships and that encourage the use of their hotlines to talk to professionals about consent, dating, and sexual activity. Both the episode and the Twitter conversation seemed to take their talking points from these and similar educational nonprofits that stress that “asking for consent every step of the way means engaging in open and honest communication between both partners” and that “alcohol...is not an excuse” (https://www.breakthecycle.org/blog/back-school-defining-consent-sexual-relationships). The use of such educational material both within the episode and the online campaign further underscores the instructional aims of the story arc beyond entertainment or even “sparking discussion.” However, in practice, the online instruction did not appear to be designed to go beyond delivering the message of affirmative consent. Neither the network or the nonprofits had a cohesive strategy for engaging in a more complicated productive dialogue with fans who were resistant to or confused by the message.

[4.12] For instance, when one viewer said she could see both Tank’s and Bay’s sides and asked how she should feel if this had happened to her, Break the Cycle responded by sending her to the Love Is Respect website to talk to counselors about consent and assault. This is, of course, likely useful for this particular fan or others seeking these types of resources, but does little to visibly engage with the question on Twitter in a forum being read by other fans. Similarly, another viewer asked how she could protect herself, since she was the same age as Bay, to which Break the Cycle responded, “Always remember, it’s never your responsibility to protect yourself from sexual assault.” While this is a necessary message to combat the ideology that women are responsible for keeping themselves from being raped, it fails to educate audiences about actions they can take to combat rape culture and to agitate for concrete solutions like policy changes and campus reform. To be clear, I don’t want to be cynical or suggest that these resources aren’t vital and useful, especially to younger viewers who may need support or education. The decision to partner with sexual assault organizations to educate viewers is, of course, an admirable one. Rather, I use these examples to highlight the ways in which online discussions can constrain the extent to which social or political issues raised within teenage television can be explored within official network spaces. Both Berridge (2013) and Stein (2015) note the ways in which popular television and social media hold potential for expanded creativity, imagination, and conversation that isn’t always fully realized.

[4.13] An additional contradictory issue with the campaign was a failure to constrain potentially destructive conversation. While millennial network social media engagement tries to guide fan behavior by promoting the use of official hashtags, suggesting topics of discussion, and encouraging interaction with network accounts, as Stein (2015) further theorizes, millennial fans don’t just engage in discussion within official boundaries or along intended ideological lines. Rather, the "ideological meaning and aesthetic moments set in motion by a millennial television series and its paratexts enter a stew of swirling meanings that coexist online in network condoned spaces and in spaces beyond network control" (63). Although the reaction to the episode by television critics was almost universally positive, fans were notably divided between praise and anger. While Weiss wanted younger audience members to understand that rape isn’t always perpetrated by "bad guys" or strangers, this message seemed to get away from her within the
ensuing fan debate. At best, fans seemed to dig their heels into whatever their previously held beliefs about assault and consent were before the episode. In other words, the same genre conventions that help open discussions about health and sexual assault within soaps and teen dramas—serialized story lines, ongoing conversations about issues, fan attachment to characters, and story lines that reject black and white morality—also have the potential to derail them.

[4.14] Not surprisingly, because the writers worked so hard to mimic real-life situations, viewers had many negative reactions to Bay’s fictional assault, comparable to those of real-life incidents of sexual assault. First, because Tank was such a well-liked character, as actual assailants often are, many fans took his side and criticized the writers for destroying his character, and blamed Bay for not taking responsibility for her actions. Comments ranged from fans expressing sympathy for Tank’s side to fans expressing anger at the writers to fans arguing that Bay’s character just felt guilty for cheating on her boyfriend and therefore decided to blame it on Tank. Secondly, because the writers chose only to show the night’s events from Bay and Tank’s differing perspectives and not from a third-person omniscient point of view, fans were frustrated that there was no cut-and-dry answer to how they should interpret the outcome. For instance, in the two weeks after the episode aired, one commentator on the Double X Chromosome Subreddit, an unofficial space for discussing women’s issues, argued, “It would have been better if the course of the night’s events were explicit.” Finally, as often happens in discussions of real-world assault cases, fans were upset that Tank got in trouble even though he was also drunk, and accused the writers of forcing a “dangerous agenda” on their audience. Another Redditor from the same thread argued that the writers were basically claiming that “men can’t be raped” and undermining the credibility of “real” survivors by claiming Bay was a victim when she wasn’t.

[4.15] This conversation also serves as an example of how fan talk moves between official and unofficial channels. While fan talk took place within condoned spaces officially encouraged by ABC Family, conversations also happened in unofficial spaces like Reddit threads, showing the ways in which millennial engagement extends beyond network-defined channels. Social media is seen by networks as a useful way to engage with fans, encourage live viewing, create interactive experiences, and attract media savvy viewers; however, social media has similar potential to bring fans together in ways that push back against network messaging and unite viewers in anger or disappointment rather than pleasure and enjoyment. Further, social media engagement has the potential both to help and hinder television series’ attempts to push certain social and political ideologies. While pop culture holds potential for health education and social issue awareness, millennial fan engagement and the rise of social TV complicates the ways in which these messages reach their intended audience. As audience and fan scholars have long argued, networks, writers, critics, and scholars cannot take as a given that audiences will take from a text its intended meaning. Social media engagement both makes resistant readings more visible and carries the potential to spread such readings across space and time. Resistant readings carry additional significance when they are tied up with educating and promoting discussion of issues like sexual assault and rape culture that already face significant pushback within the public sphere.

[4.16] In this case, while the writers intended for their handling of sexual assault to complicate television’s usual narratives, and though the genre of the teen drama was indeed used to complicate the typical sexual assault story line, the online chat makes visible the ways in which nuance and complexity, while generally seen as admirable, can be rejected by viewers’ negotiated readings of the text. Further, the online conversation brings these negotiated and openly hostile readings beyond viewers’ own living rooms, potentially undermining the intended outcome of the Switched After-Chat.

5. Conclusion

[5.1] This case study examines the ways in which discussions surrounding sensitive or controversial topics can be both helped and hindered through fan talk surrounding television texts, and how the educational potential of shows like Switched at Birth needs to be accompanied by more sophisticated social media engagement. ABC Family’s clumsy attempt to apply its usual #SwitchedAfterChat framework to an especially sensitive and complicated story about sexual assault makes visible the ways in which the awareness and education encouraged by millennial teen dramas can be undercut by these same conventions. While many television critics applauded the producers and writers for complicating the usual depiction of sexual assault on television, the social media conversation made clear that many fans found the narrative frustrating in ways that caused them to dig their heels in on their preexisting understanding of sexual assault and consent. These challenges, of course, aren’t confined to teen TV but play out within adult programming as well. As debates about sensitive topics, from sexual assault to racism to sexuality to religion, play out
on our television screens and online, how might networks and fans themselves work to foster a more productive online space? As anyone who has spent time on Twitter knows, the platform has the potential to both foster and break down discussion, so it’s no surprise that fan conversation is any different. No network or showrunner will ever nor should ever want to control all ensuing fan talk; however, if networks want to better foster conversations surrounding their own programming, they need to commit resources to doing so rather than relying on typical marketing strategies. Instead of sticking to a rote set of talking points or employing actors and actresses to guide complex conversations, networks might bring in educators familiar with online spaces and debate to more fully respond to fan questions, pushback, and divisive rhetoric. While partnering with a nonprofit is a useful first step, a broader approach to sexual assault would need to involve not only those equipped to deal with individual concerns, but also experts knowledgeable about the social and political contexts in which sexual assault happens and is understood. Networks might also foster relationships with fans who frequently guide and engage in discussion to help lead ensuing conversations surrounding particularly sensitive episodes. While I don’t have space to address a wider range of programming in this piece, future research may further theorize fan talk as debate over social issues and best practices as to how networks and fans can foster productive discussions surrounding sensitive topics both within millennial spaces and within a broader range of media texts.

6. Note

1. For an in-depth look at the history, context, and controversy surrounding affirmative consent and the growing campaign to implement "yes means yes" policies at college campuses, see Signs' digital archive of related articles, both popular and scholarly (http://signsjournal.org/currents-affirmative-consent/affirmative-consent-and-yes-means-yes/).

7. Works cited


Earpers, interactions, and emotions: Wynonna Earp, “the best fandom ever”

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[0.1] Abstract—In many regards, the arrival of social media has significantly changed interactions between fans and television show creators. The degree to which such changes have been positively welcomed has varied across television shows and networks. Nevertheless, such shifting relationships show no signs of dissipating in the near future. This article analyzes how Syfy’s Wynonna Earp (2016–) has thus far successfully cultivated a positive connection with its fandom, built largely on concerted effort and emotional awareness.

[0.2] Keywords—Social media; Television; Twitter


I. Introduction

[1.1] In 1996, the first issue of Beau Smith’s Wynonna Earp comic book series was released. It spun the tale of Wynonna Earp, descendant of legendary gunslinger, Wyatt Earp. Like her famous ancestor, Wynonna carries on the family tradition of working in law enforcement, but her adversaries are not typical outlaws like those that Wyatt faced down at the O.K. Corral. Instead of simply trying to tamp down a law-breaking contingent of the population, Wynonna also has to grapple with demonic forces. Though the comic book series had a relatively short run in the 1990s, additional iterations were developed throughout the early 2000s, and the Syfy television network acquired the rights to Wynonna’s story in 2015. In spring 2016, the Wynonna Earp television series (2016–) made its debut.

[1.2] Emily Andras, creator of Syfy’s Lost Girl (2010–16), operates as creator and showrunner of the series, which ended its first season with an average audience of 556,000 viewers (Goldberg 2016). Though the belief that we’re in an era of “Peak TV,” in which the sheer number of television shows limits one’s ability to watch everything, has significantly lowered most ratings expectations, the viewership of Wynonna Earp’s first season was still such that the show was considered to be on the bubble. However, it garnered a fair amount of critical acclaim, so much so that ratings site Rotten Tomatoes identified Wynonna Earp as Syfy’s highest-rated show in 2016 (2016). Developing almost immediately within that small cluster of viewers was a vocal community of fans known as Earpers.

[1.3] Though it’s commonplace for fans to reach out to the creators of their favorite shows, such communication is notoriously fraught. It’s easy enough to construe this communication of ideas and desires as mutually beneficial, but the extent to and methods via which industrial creators demonstrate interest in fan perspectives cannot be entirely extricated from economic and labor concerns. As Julie Levin Russo reminds us, “Bargains are being struck between established and emerging sites of cultural power...we need to bear in mind the stakes and conditions of framing visibility in the corporate media’s terms” (2014, 458). That is to say, it’s risky to choose, as a fan or a fandom, to become intertwined with corporate interests. And the fact that a particular fan desire, such as increased on-screen racial diversity, is ostensibly met by a given show does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of commodification and misrepresentation.
This article will primarily analyze a set of choices made by those in charge of the *Wynonna Earp* television series and its online communications, which have led to the development of an industry–fan relationship that, at least at the time of writing, is generally regarded as positive and productive. On one hand, many of the steps that the *Wynonna Earp* cast and crew have taken during this process, such as live-tweeting episodes, have become old hat in today's networked media universe. However, what noticeably sets *Wynonna Earp* apart is the perceived level of transparency, thoughtfulness, and care associated with its interactions. Key components that bolster this perception include having a responsive cast and crew that readily engage fans and fan creations, an official social media account that takes the opportunity to connect with fans on a personal level, and having someone at the helm like Emily Andras, who both conveys a keen sense of awareness of fan investment and an appreciation of all that fans are capable of.

Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that authenticity is intently sought in contemporary culture, saying we seek "anything that feels authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality" and we’re pressed with "the looming sense that we are not real enough, that our world is becoming more and more inauthentic" (2012, 3). Applied to the relationship between Earpers, the cast, and the crew, one can begin to see how the projection of authenticity, especially contrasted against the distant sterile ways in which some other shows interact digitally, would stand out. Thus, rather than arguing whether *Wynonna Earp*'s fan engagement choices are truly authentic, I argue that they are constructed in such a way—rooted in emotional connection—that they’re perceived to be authentic. That perception is then reciprocated with significant fan labor (which is also then reciprocated with additional labor from the show side). To be clear, I am not arguing that these actions are inauthentic. Aside from being incredibly difficult to prove authenticity in any concrete fashion, I am a fan of the show myself, and I acknowledge that this likely colors my own perception to some degree. Furthermore, I believe that the veracity of this authenticity is ultimately beside the point. Instead, what matters most, and what might be instructive for other industry creators as they craft their own relationships with fans, is that these interactions are perceived to be authentic, genuine, and real.

2. Digital interactions

Though it's more or less the norm in the contemporary moment, television shows and networks did not always want to have interactive digital relationships with fans. Nor were many of these industry representatives initially open to fan productions existing in the many corners of the World Wide Web. The fact that the official *Wynonna Earp* Twitter account often shares fan art as well as jewelry and clothing made by fans is one of many markers of how these relationships have developed over the years. In the past, such fan creations were often met with punitive responses, and it's not entirely unheard-of for similar responses to be disseminated today, which suggests that despite the apparent importance of fandom to the survival of television shows, there's still an industrial desire to maintain control and place limitations on the contributions of fandom. Nevertheless, as the internet and digital media have become more and more intertwined with daily life, many corporations, rather than trying to wrest control away from fans, have realized it could be more beneficial to bring fans into the fold and direct them toward relevant economic desires. In the world of television, such engagement has become a near-necessity. An entirely new set of occupations has cropped up in recent years to achieve this goal, and businesses like FanBridge now exist to "grow, engage, and monetize fan bases" via an assortment of tools and algorithms (FanBridge 2017). This engagement, of course, produces its own set of complications. Inasmuch as fans might feel a modicum of relief, Kristina Busse points out, "The danger to fan culture has become the co-optation and colonization of fan creations, interactions, and spaces rather than earlier fan generations' fears of litigation and cease-and-desist orders" (2015).

Lack of understanding and/or desire to learn about standard fandom behaviors or desires can result in a range of disappointing ventures. Sometimes it's not a matter of simple disconnect between the industry and fans, but rather a disconnect between various facets of the industry. For example, in *Wired TV*, Denise Mann highlights the lackluster results of marketing executives attempting to entice fans with content without including writers in that process. According to Mann, this led to the development of "a jumble of uninspired brand integrations, behind-the-scenes interviews, and contests rather than compelling and immersive story expansions" (2014, 10–11). This isn’t to say that fans would have no interest in those things, but rather that other, potentially more valued, approaches exist. Though it’s taken for granted that the internet makes it easier for fans to convey their wishes, that does not guarantee that those wishes will be acted upon in the desired manner. Part of the disconnect here likely stems from both a...
misunderstanding of fans as well as a misalignment of goals. According to *Digital Content Next*, highlighting a 2017 PwC media report:

[2.3] Today’s entertainment and media companies must be “fan-centric.” And to remain competitive, they must use technology and data to attract, retain, and engage consumers. Content and distribution remain important factors in monetization and healthy survival rests on a positive user experience. Businesses built on occasional and noncommittal visitors are not likely to succeed. (Price 2017)

[2.4] Though this summary begins by directing attention to the importance of fans, it quickly collapses them in with consumers, users, and visitors, all of which can be interpreted quite differently. This collapse of terminology is not unique to this particular report, and it gestures toward the fact that though industry insiders may speak of wishing to appeal to fans, their sense of who fans are or what fans can contribute is not necessarily attuned to fan perspectives.

[2.5] Upon examining the types of contributions the *Wynonna Earp* team puts forth, the standard interviews can be found, but there's much more. For example, two different transmedia projects, The Road to Purgatory and Purgatory Case Files, have been developed over the course of the two seasons that have aired thus far. Both projects built on a foundation of investigation, which both was thematically relevant and actively invited fans into the narrative. Additionally, both projects encouraged fans to work cooperatively, something that Earpers, who have become known for camaraderie, were all too ready to do. If indeed a show and/or network’s goal is to get fans to “circulate endorsements of television series and stars, entertainment content, and consumer products,” particularly in a way that doesn’t come across as a cheap ad, then thinking specifically about what might engage a particular group of fans is likely to be more effective than appealing to some broad conceptualization of what a fan is or wants (Gillan 2014, 4). Not only is such a choice likely to be more relevant to a given group of fans, but also a specialized approach conveys the desired attentiveness that helps to make fans feel more recognized and understood.

[2.6] However, as Suzanne Scott notes, "While these textual expansions and supplements are free, ancillary content develops alternate revenue streams for the industry via banner ads and embedded commercials, as well as being designed to reinforce the narrative value of the 'primary' television text" (2013, 321). With so many different outlets vying for attention in the contemporary media landscape, attaining active fan support has become a matter of survival for most shows, which Scott highlights elsewhere, arguing that the impulse is "more concerned with creating alternative revenue streams for the failing commercial model of television than it is with fostering a fan community or encouraging fan practices" (2009). Though some outlets and creators express less concern with ratings (at least publicly), having as many viewers as possible is still a fundamental part of the television industry. And it makes economic sense to utilize alternate means, such as transmedia projects and other industry-created content, even when seemingly contradictory to fan desires, to make up some of the financial difference stemming from lower viewership.

[2.7] Additionally, there's a clear logic to cultivating a relationship with fans who can then actively promote and create for the show, which could in turn bring in additional viewers who might find themselves enticed by the fan activities of someone on one of their many timelines. Earpers continually advocate for *Wynonna Earp* on social media and have successfully campaigned for both second and third seasons. In fact, the third season campaign began before the second season started airing, which underscores the depth of the connection that many Earpers have to this show and the goodwill that’s been earned along the way.

[2.8] According to Jonathan Gray, "Much of the business of media...is conducted before watching, when hopes, expectations, worries, concerns, and desires coalesce to offer us images and scripts of what a text might be" (2010, 25). The fan endorsements that we do or do not see play a significant role in our selection processes. Despite prevalent negative stereotypes about certain types of fans, an overarching goal today is for viewers to extend their fandom into all facets of daily life rather than simply the timeslot in which a given show airs or the weekend in which a new season is dropped. In 2009, a tagline for the CW television network was "CW TV: see it, hear it, blog it, live it" (Gillan 2010, 26). The first half recalls behaviors that have obviously always been associated with television, whereas the latter gestures toward new possibilities supported by technological advances. Branding has also long been part of the television landscape, but what’s being conveyed here extends beyond historical conceptions. As Matthew Guschwan explains, "Branding used to be understood as primarily a top-down process initiated by marketers who use mass-mediated advertising to persuade consumers to believe in a product's (superior) quality, value, desirability, etc. More recent brand campaigns extend branding into the realm of lifestyle or culture" (2012, 22).
The Syfy network echoes this sentiment in a current advertising campaign. Debuting in 2017, the "It's a Fan Thing" campaign became a noticeable part of Syfy’s social media presence, being used both in self-referential tweets as well as when the account was completing related tasks, such as live-tweeting conventions. This campaign took off simultaneous to Syfy entering its twenty-fifth year of existence and fashioning itself as a home for fans of all things science fiction and fantasy, even programming that doesn’t air on Syfy.

In the first tweet that references the new tagline, the channel’s official Twitter account (@SYFY) says, "You are not alone in the universe. Welcome home. #ItsAFanThing" (2017). The accompanying video emphasizes the community inherent to being a fan, and highlights common fan behaviors, such as dissecting scenes and sharing theories on Reddit. Importantly, this behavior is not cast negatively, and the video, which is composed of people from seemingly varied backgrounds and identities, suggests that all are welcome and that it’s perfectly reasonable for fandom to become an important, if not the most important, part of your life. Subsequent iterations continue in the same vein, suggesting that if you exhibit any of the described fan behaviors, you’re "one of us," which is a fundamentally good thing.

Though this campaign began well after Wynonna Earp began airing and after Earpers came together, it’s easy enough to see how the promotion of such an ethos would help to further promote the positive affective connection that many Earpers were already feeling. And though Syfy has not acknowledged any explicit connection between the campaign and Wynonna Earp, the ethos of the Earper community seems central to the campaign, which began concurrent to the show’s second season. Additionally, while The Road to Purgatory was hosted on Tumblr, Purgatory Case Files is on the Syfy website, possibly suggesting that these various strands of fandom focus have become intertwined. Nevertheless, Syfy has to be careful about how it chooses to proceed with the campaign, because it runs the risk of skewing too close to what Guschwan refers to as brandom—"the pseudo-fan culture engineered by brand managers eager to cultivate consumer labor and loyalty while preempting the possibility of resistance that participatory fan culture promises" (2012, 26). Perhaps significantly, this campaign debuted on the heels of Syfy becoming recognized as a space for progressive representations, as evidenced by its production of shows such as Wynonna Earp, Dark Matter (2015–17), and Killjoys (2015–) (Fowle 2016). As such, Syfy constructs itself, both in marketing and in production, as a place of possibility. This is paired with a focus on connection and conviviality, as well as being a home for those who might otherwise feel outcast. From this perspective, it’s not strange or problematic for fans to devote a significant portion of their lives to Syfy’s shows. And if others don’t yet understand, no worries, because it’s a fan thing, and Syfy is there for you.

### 3. Earpers

Although similar to many contemporary fan bases, there are specific qualities attached to fans of Wynonna Earp that have helped establish the Earpers as a distinct community. A fan-created definition of Earper from Twitter user Brandi McCloud (@BrandiMcCloud) reads as follows:

A member of the Wynonna Earp fandom. One who demonstrates no chill at all times concerning anything Wynonna Earp related. One who fangirls hard over cast crew and anyone associated with Wynonna Earp in any way. One who embraces and supports fellow Earpers. May be ridiculously talented, funny, and/or resemble a unicorn. (2016)

As described here, many Earpers active on social media display a consistent interest in anything tangentially related to the show. Furthermore, the notion that the fandom is grounded in friendship is often echoed in posts. While it’s clear that Earpers are fans of the show, the definition is also distinctly attuned to particular non-viewing-related behaviors and emotions. This definition is notably representative of an affective commitment, which Robert V. Kozinets describes as a "highly committed and evangelical element of fandom, of the fan experience, that has drawn marketers, business consultants, and business managers to embrace wholeheartedly the identity of consumer-as-fan" (2014, 164). Though the Earper definition was crafted by a fan, rather than the Syfy network and/or creators of the show, its existence suggests that the desired emotional connection is in effect.

Given the dedication of Earpers, it may come as no surprise to find that several fan works have been, and continue to be, created. In particular, the romantic pairing of Wynonna’s younger sister, Waverly, and Purgatory police officer, Nicole Haught, is central to many of these creations. The strong sisterly bond between Wynonna and Waverly is
also a typical area of attention. Importantly, the *Wynonna Earp* cast, crew, and official Twitter account both acknowledge and encourage these works. And in some instances, fan suggestions, such as Nicole’s cat being named Calamity Jane, have been adopted by the show. Though fairly minute, such incorporations aid in demonstrating to Earpers that they’re actually being heard.

[3.5] Perhaps one of the most notable fan productions related to the television series is *Tales of the Black Badge*, a podcast hosted by two fans, Bonnie Ferrar and Kevin Bachelder. In addition to episode recaps, the podcast also includes interviews with cast and crew members, sharing of *Wynonna Earp*-related news, and discussions of *Wynonna Earp*’s convention presence. Ferrar and Bachelder also host *Whiskey and Doughnuts*, a video hangout series that provides an opportunity for fans to come together to discuss the show and that also includes cast and crew members. That the cast and crew are willing to directly interact with fans in these ways on a semi-regular basis suggests an ongoing commitment, rather than an isolated metric-oriented one. Ferrar and Bachelder were invited to visit the *Wynonna Earp* set while the second season of the show was in production, further underscoring the show’s investment in engaging Earpers.

4. Official interactions

[4.1] Though the methods via which television shows are able to interact with fans like Earpers have multiplied in recent years, there’s no set rule book for how those interactions should occur. Given the prevalence of social media, it’s obvious why television shows would attempt to reach viewers in such spaces. In the case of *Wynonna Earp* in particular, an organized effort, via multiple modes, has gone into nurturing the relationship with fans. To see how this has taken shape, one of the most obvious spaces to consider is the show’s official Twitter account, @WynonnaEarp.

[4.2] Since its inception, the account has undertaken several measures to reach fans, including both encouraging and promoting fan works as well as developing the aforementioned transmedia projects. As Karen Frost explains, "@WynonnaEarp draws fans in with its light-hearted, inclusive ‘personality’ and interacts with them on multiple levels through its tweets and retweets, embracing with more than open arms its queer fans" (2016). In other words, the account serves to reinforce and expand upon the inclusive tenets that have become markers of both Earpers and the *Wynonna Earp* television series itself. Frost goes on to provide specific examples of how the account makes transparent its support of all things queer, such as shipping *Game of Thrones*’ (2011–) Daenerys Targaryen and Yara Greyjoy, providing information about donating blood after the Pulse nightclub shooting, and soliciting responses to queer fan fiction prompts (2016). Each of these acts clearly marks @WynonnaEarp’s awareness of and respect for what is likely a significant portion of the show’s fandom. From my observations of and interactions with fellow Earpers, many of those who identify as part of the fandom also identify as female and/or as members of the queer community. That the show is aware of this component of its audience is not revolutionary. In fact, several television shows—including The CW’s *The 100* (2014–)—have been criticized for shrewd attempts to capitalize on the queer community’s support without following through on providing thoughtful queer representation. Throughout the series’ first two seasons, main characters like Waverly and Nicole, and supporting characters like Kevin, are more than plot points or tragedies. They have their own identities, moral compasses, and curious backgrounds, and each character also has an impact on the development of the series’ overarching narrative. The ongoing choices that *Wynonna Earp* makes both in terms of characterization and in its social media representation indicate a sustained interest in representing the queer community.

[4.3] In addition to Frost’s article, these actions have often been recognized by Earpers. As Twitter user Nic (@clonenic) says, "Dear Shows, Please look at how @WynonnaEarp treats its fans and learn something from it. Sincerely, The #Earpers" (2016). User zedface (@AliciaABL) echoes the sentiment with "Like... If there’s a way to engage audience at every turn, @WynonnaEarp does it right" (2016). These tweets serve as useful indicators of how Earpers perceive the show’s investment in the fandom. The tweets draw a clear line between a positive approach taken by @WynonnaEarp and lacking approaches taken by other shows. They also posit that other shows could and should learn from *Wynonna Earp*. As Twitter users, these fans effusively share their love with all of their followers, who may, in turn, choose to watch the show. Thus, Kozinets’s assertion that "The consumer, intrinsically motivated and loyal to the brand for life, entrenched in networks bound to the brand, becomes even more committed to the brand than any merely career-driven marketer or executive ever could" comes to fruition (2014, 169).
5. An interview with a social media manager

[5.1] In the course of working on this project, I conducted an interview with Natalie Zina Walschots, who serves as the social media manager for the *Wynonna Earp* television series, and agreed to provide some insight into behind-the-scenes operations of the account.

[5.2] Though it’s the case that most television shows today have social media accounts, the detailed business of running such accounts is not necessarily common knowledge. Indeed, we often don’t know who is running a given account, how they were hired, or how much oversight is involved. In Walschots’s case, she has served as the social media manager/community manager for *Wynonna Earp* since 2016. With a prior background as a writer and community manager, Walschots was brought in as a subcontractor via Digital Howard. According to Walschots, her job, broadly speaking, is to "manage the social media accounts and speak directly to fans."

[5.3] Walschots achieves this goal in a variety of ways, such as posting live updates as new episodes air and helping to plan the show’s social media strategy. However, Walschots does not simply relay her observations about Earpers to her employers. Instead, utilizing her prior writing experience, Walschots "proposed, created and was the primary writer for *The Road to Purgatory.*" Given that the crafting of such a project is an extra undertaking to simply making and distributing a television show, one might surmise that a key component to developing a dynamic relationship with fans in the present-day is the willingness to engage in additional labor beyond previous norms. Indeed, in thinking about the cast and crew’s interactions with fans and the high level of responsiveness to a collective that massively outnumbers those that work on the show, it’s clear that having a less extensive social media presence would, to some extent, both be easier and less risky. At the same time, it’s quite likely that the recognition of the additional labor is one of the factors that contributes to the positive sentiment that Earpers maintain. Seeing that those working on behalf of *Wynonna Earp* are willing to go the extra mile increases feelings of being valued.

[5.4] For Walschots and her employers, the sentiment conveyed is that the possibility of goodwill is worth the risks. When I asked her about *The Road to Purgatory*’s creation, she described it as "a gift to the fans," and she later added, "We were so supported by the fan community, and wanted to give something back." Walschots clearly recognizes contributions from Earpers here, and her explanation also gestures toward fandom's gift economy in which, as Karen Hellekson explains, there are "three elements related to the gift: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate" (2009). There’s a slipperiness to conflating industry creations with fan behaviors, especially given economic impulses and the misguided ways in which industry often approaches interactions with fans as noted earlier, and yet the fact that *The Road to Purgatory* was created at a time in which the cast and crew didn’t know whether the show would be renewed supports the genuineness of this reciprocation.

[5.5] According to Walschots, this sentiment extends from the top down. She explained to me that "showrunner Emily Andras made it clear from the beginning that she adored her fans and we tried to embody and express that care and affection." In the numerous interviews that Andras has given since the series began, she often speaks of the fans in highly positive terms, such as those quoted in the title of this essay. When I asked Walschots herself to describe Earpers, she characterized them as "incredibly passionate, engaged fans who created a community that they wanted to see in the world," indicating an awareness both of a perceived gap to be filled as well as the fact that though they may not technically be "in charge," fans put in significant work to construct this community.

6. An ongoing negotiation

[6.1] It is important to place Andras’s engagement with her fans in the context of other showrunners—active or inactive—on social media. That television creators might want to maintain some distance from fans is not a difficult concept to grasp, if only to maintain a measure of creative control and to avoid sometimes complicated interactions with fans. Within the context of television, having relatively direct access to stars and creators assists in cultivating emotional attachments. To quote Gillan, “Twitter...allows viewers to feel as if they are part of the everyday lives of the actors playing their favorite characters” (2014, 259). This close connection fosters real sentiment. Thus, when it seems as if fan interests are being ignored or maliciously attacked, the resulting hurt feelings are effectively real.
We can look to The 100 as one example of how such tensions can play out. Like Wynonna Earp, The 100 is a fantasy show with a devoted fandom, including several self-identified queer viewers. However, in 2016, those in charge of the The 100 found themselves at odds with many of those very same fans. In brief, immediately following the consummation of the relationship between two female characters, Lexa and Clark, Lexa was murdered. While the character’s exit was precipitated by the fact that her portrayer, Alycia Debnam-Carey, was leaving the series, the manner in which the exit occurred, as well as the subsequent response (or lack thereof) to fan grievances by showrunner Jason Rothenberg, became a significant flashpoint in the conversation about the nature of the relationship between the television industry and fans, and to the “Bury Your Gays” trope identifiable across television.

While some cast and crew members were responsive in the aftermath of Lexa’s death, Rothenberg primarily remained silent, initially choosing only to engage with tweets that supported the narrative choice (Roth 2016a). This is one of many ways in which the approaches of Rothenberg and Andras differ. From following Andras on Twitter, one can see that she often errs on the sides of responsiveness and foresight, such as when she warns fans that something they might not like will be occurring in an upcoming episode. This transparency is part of what allows Earpers to feel taken care of. Though Andras likely would not want to give away too many details ahead of time, the fact that she is thoughtful enough about the fan experience to offer preparation promotes a sense of care for the fandom. When Rothenberg chose to selectively remain silent, some fans of The 100 responded in kind by unfollowing him on Twitter, an act that may not necessarily seem significant, but that serves as one way in which fans can clearly convey their disapproval (Roth 2016a).

After some time, Rothenberg did make an official statement, which came in the form of a Medium post titled "The Life and Death of Lexa." In the post, Rothenberg explains his decision-making process while also acknowledging that he failed to understand the gravity of the situation. Importantly, he states, “Knowing everything I know now, Lexa’s death would have played out differently” (Rothenberg 2016). This line could have potentially operated as a salve, an acknowledgment of the hurt feelings, and a sign that more thoughtfulness would be employed in the future. But when The 100’s panel at WonderCon predictably became focused on Lexa’s death during the Q&A, Rothenberg remained fairly committed to the belief that Lexa had to die (Lincoln 2016). During that Q&A, Rothenberg stated that the way he’d interacted with fans had "some way set up around this relationship an unrealistic expectation that Lexa would be OK, that she’d walk off into the sunset” (Lincoln 2016). The "some way" is a key issue here. Rothenberg expresses a lack of awareness and understanding with respect to the fans’ perceptions and expectations, especially given how the crew of The 100 had actively courted and reassured a queer viewership across various digital mediums.

Given the lengthy amount of time over which these choices were made, it’s not too difficult to see how when Rothenberg claims ignorance with respect to fan expectations, it can be perceived as deceptive and disingenuous. Dany Roth refers to this particular set of actions as "the ugliest of all possibilities" (2016b). It’s not as though fans are unaware of the underlying marketing impulses inherent to these interactions. In fact, the We Deserved Better website home page—which galvanized criticism of the show’s treatment of its queer fans—states "No one is criticizing the writers/producers/creators of this content for using social media and interacting with fans, or promoting the popular aspects of the show, in order to pull in more viewers...But there should always be lines that shouldn’t be crossed" (http://wedeservedbetter.com/). To these fans, a serious transgression was committed for the sake of viewership and without any consideration of the emotional investment they’d been making, pointing to the need for emotionally attentive engagement by showrunners like Rothenberg, which failed to be executed in this case.

7. The self-aware showrunner

In the midst of the furor over The 100, Wynonna Earp began airing. It’s unclear how much attention Emily Andras paid to that specific situation, which was only one of many television–fandom missteps. However, given the significant amount of mainstream press the situation garnered, such as in Caroline Framke’s “Queer Women Have Been Killed on Television for Decades. Now The 100’s Fans are Fighting Back” (https://www.vox.com/2016/3/25/11302564/lesbian-deaths-television-trope), it’s reasonably likely that Andras had some familiarity. Regardless, Andras has been explicit in terms of her awareness of the weight of her responsibility to Earpers. In an interview with Kyle Fowle, she notes that the sheer dearth of LGBT characters and complex female characters on screen is most likely the reason why fans latch on to these characters and shows with such intensity (2016). And bearing that in mind, Andras is aware of the need to respect that investment and not whimsically jerk fans around. In another interview, she adds, "Nobody wants to feel tricked, in
real life or when sitting down at the end of a hard day to watch something that is supposed to bring them pleasure" (Snarker 2016). This quote in particular hearkens to the crux of the matter raised by fans of The 100 who spoke back to the show through social media.

[7.2] Andras’s explicit awareness has not gone unnoticed. In an article titled, “Wynonna Earp and Why TV Is Important to Me,” Alyssa Berkowitz draws attention to a moment in the show’s first season when it seems as if the character Nicole Haught might (but doesn’t) die (2016). Given that Wynonna Earp began airing during a resurgence of the "Bury Your Gays" trope on television, this particular survival carried additional significance. In fact, in what was then a fairly unprecedented move, Andras went so far as to publicly announce to fans that both of the show’s queer characters would survive the duration of the season, demonstrating an attentiveness to an audience in desperate need of some reassurance and also foreshadowing Andras’s future methods of precaution. Berkowitz distills the significance of Haught’s survival, saying, "The show was telling me that they have my back. With that scene they looked their queer female viewers straight in our eyes and said "We see you. We understand your pain. You matter to us. We care"” (2016). What Berkowitz highlights here is a clear emotional connection between her, as a fan, and the show. Social media’s existence theoretically provides the opportunity for more voices to be heard, but Berkowitz expresses the importance of action, which goes beyond just hearing. Given that the episodes had been filmed before the The 100/Bury Your Gays upheavals occurred, it’s notable that the narrative choice to have these characters survive wasn’t made as a reaction or as an appeasement, but as an indicator of thoughtfulness embedded from the beginning (Logan 2016).

[7.3] Though she is firmly in the camp of communicating with fans, as evidenced by her social media presence, interviews, and my interview with Walschots, Andras knows that tension can still arise as she continues to interact with fans. She specifically notes, for example, the difficulty in managing fan interests while also avoiding stagnation, saying, "As a writer, it’s very difficult. Because my job is to bring the drama. Again, I can’t necessarily have a couple sitting happily on a couch for four seasons. Like I think you will get bored of that” (Snarker 2016). Indeed, the dramatic ups and downs are perhaps amongst the primary reasons why many of us love our favorite shows, even though they can also be stressful and disappointing.

[7.4] Yet Andras finds communication with fans to have particular value because of its capacity to make space for marginalized communities. Such space making is what Andras describes as being responsible for the current surplus of good television shows (Fowle 2016). Furthermore, in a Reddit AMA that took place on the day of Wynonna Earp’s first season finale, Andras articulated a personal benefit to her ongoing social media engagement with fans. She explained, "I love twitter. It has allowed me to connect with the fans of my work in a way that makes writing feel a little less isolating as a profession" (2016). She also effusively declared, "This is the best fandom ever" (Andras 2016). For Andras, though there are potential downsides to the openness of her engagement with the fans, the good far outweighs the bad.

8. Conclusion

[8.1] When the The 100 controversy was occurring, CW president Mark Pedowitz affirmed his support of Jason Rothenberg’s decision-making and storytelling. But he also notably said, "What Jason has done, Jason has done to himself" (Reiher 2016). Indeed, reaching out to fans in hopes of promotion is not industry malpractice, but ignoring the emotional stakes involved just might be. Kristina Busse notes that "fans tend to regard fan labor as a labor of love and as a shared passion" and it’s that very same emotional investment that puts fan labor at risk of being co-opted (2015). Though The CW renewed The 100 for additional seasons following Lexa’s death, ratings have declined. And at the time of writing this essay, more than a year after the controversy, Rothenberg has only tweeted once since sharing his Medium post responding to the controversy, suggesting that he did take away some lessons from what occurred, but perhaps not the ones that best serve the future of fan engagement.

[8.2] According to Sarah Banet-Weiser, "We want to believe—indeed, I argue that we need to believe—that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange" (2012, 5). I’ve contended, throughout this essay, that the powers that be involved with Wynonna Earp understand and respond to this desire fundamentally. It’s apparent in every act and choice made with respect to interacting with fans. And particularly in a contemporary cultural context in which every single day’s news seems to bring about some new horror, it would make sense for fans to
gravitate to a space that conveys care, understanding, and a general sense of peace. While it is not possible to make sweeping proclamations about whether the *Wynonna Earp* model will be replicated across the industry, and this analysis has in no way been meant to imply perfection, it’s likely that other shows within the Syfy network may be influenced by *Wynonna Earp* as they craft their own relationships to their fans and as they operate in conjunction with Syfy’s new fan-centered campaign. Whether *Wynonna Earp* will be able to sustain the current emotional connection remains to be seen. But for now, much like a weather app that tells us—regardless of actual temperature—what we can expect to feel when we step outside, what matters most is what Earpers feel. And as of right now? It feels real.

9. References


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Abstract—In many regards, the arrival of social media has significantly changed interactions between fans and television show creators. The degree to which such changes have been positively welcomed has varied across television shows and networks. Nevertheless, such shifting relationships show no signs of dissipating in the near future. This article analyzes how Syfy's *Wynonna Earp* (2016–) has thus far successfully cultivated a positive connection with its fandom, built largely on concerted effort and emotional awareness.

Keywords—Social media; Television; Twitter


I. Introduction

In 1996, the first issue of Beau Smith’s *Wynonna Earp* comic book series was released. It spun the tale of Wynonna Earp, descendant of legendary gunslinger, Wyatt Earp. Like her famous ancestor, Wynonna carries on the family tradition of working in law enforcement, but her adversaries are not typical outlaws like those that Wyatt faced down at the O.K. Corral. Instead of simply trying to tamp down a law-breaking contingent of the population, Wynonna also has to grapple with demonic forces. Though the comic book series had a relatively short run in the 1990s, additional iterations were developed throughout the early 2000s, and the Syfy television network acquired the rights to Wynonna’s story in 2015. In spring 2016, the *Wynonna Earp* television series (2016–) made its debut.

Emily Andras, creator of Syfy’s *Lost Girl* (2010–16), operates as creator and showrunner of the series, which ended its first season with an average audience of 556,000 viewers (Goldberg 2016). Though the belief that we’re in an era of "Peak TV," in which the sheer number of television shows limits one’s ability to watch everything, has significantly lowered most ratings expectations, the viewership of *Wynonna Earp*’s first season was still such that the show was considered to be on the bubble. However, it garnered a fair amount of critical acclaim, so much so that ratings site Rotten Tomatoes identified *Wynonna Earp* as Syfy’s highest-rated show in 2016 (2016). Developing almost immediately within that small cluster of viewers was a vocal community of fans known as Earpers.

Though it’s commonplace for fans to reach out to the creators of their favorite shows, such communication is notoriously fraught. It’s easy enough to construe this communication of ideas and desires as mutually beneficial, but the extent to and methods via which industrial creators demonstrate interest in fan perspectives cannot be entirely extricated from economic and labor concerns. As Julie Levin Russo reminds us, "Bargains are being struck between established and emerging sites of cultural power...we need to bear in mind the stakes and conditions of framing visibility in the corporate media’s terms" (2014, 458). That is to say, it’s risky to choose, as a fan or a fandom, to become intertwined with corporate interests. And the fact that a particular fan desire, such as increased on-screen racial diversity, is ostensibly met by a given show does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of commodification and misrepresentation.
This article will primarily analyze a set of choices made by those in charge of the *Wynonna Earp* television series and its online communications, which have led to the development of an industry–fan relationship that, at least at the time of writing, is generally regarded as positive and productive. On one hand, many of the steps that the *Wynonna Earp* cast and crew have taken during this process, such as live-tweeting episodes, have become old hat in today's networked media universe. However, what noticeably sets *Wynonna Earp* apart is the perceived level of transparency, thoughtfulness, and care associated with its interactions. Key components that bolster this perception include having a responsive cast and crew that readily engage fans and fan creations, an official social media account that takes the opportunity to connect with fans on a personal level, and having someone at the helm like Emily Andras, who both conveys a keen sense of awareness of fan investment and an appreciation of all that fans are capable of.

Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that authenticity is intently sought in contemporary culture, saying we seek "anything that feels authentic, just as we lament more and more that it is a world of inauthenticity, that we are governed by superficiality" and we're pressed with "the looming sense that we are not real enough, that our world is becoming more and more inauthentic" (2012, 3). Applied to the relationship between Earpers, the cast, and the crew, one can begin to see how the projection of authenticity, especially contrasted against the distant sterile ways in which some other shows interact digitally, would stand out. Thus, rather than arguing whether *Wynonna Earp*’s fan engagement choices are truly authentic, I argue that they are constructed in such a way—rooted in emotional connection—that they’re perceived to be authentic. That perception is then reciprocated with significant fan labor (which is also then reciprocated with additional labor from the show side). To be clear, I am not arguing that these actions are inauthentic. Aside from being incredibly difficult to prove authenticity in any concrete fashion, I am a fan of the show myself, and I acknowledge that this likely colors my own perception to some degree. Furthermore, I believe that the veracity of this authenticity is ultimately beside the point. Instead, what matters most, and what might be instructive for other industry creators as they craft their own relationships with fans, is that these interactions are perceived to be authentic, genuine, and real.

### 2. Digital interactions

Though it's more or less the norm in the contemporary moment, television shows and networks did not always want to have interactive digital relationships with fans. Nor were many of these industry representatives initially open to fan productions existing in the many corners of the World Wide Web. The fact that the official *Wynonna Earp* Twitter account often shares fan art as well as jewelry and clothing made by fans is one of many markers of how these relationships have developed over the years. In the past, such fan creations were often met with punitive responses, and it’s not entirely unheard-of for similar responses to be disseminated today, which suggests that despite the apparent importance of fandom to the survival of television shows, there’s still an industrial desire to maintain control and place limitations on the contributions of fandom. Nevertheless, as the internet and digital media have become more and more intertwined with daily life, many corporations, rather than trying to wrest control away from fans, have realized it could be more beneficial to bring fans into the fold and direct them toward relevant economic desires. In the world of television, such engagement has become a near-necessity. An entirely new set of occupations has cropped up in recent years to achieve this goal, and businesses like FanBridge now exist to "grow, engage, and monetize fan bases" via an assortment of tools and algorithms (FanBridge 2017). This engagement, of course, produces its own set of complications. Inasmuch as fans might feel a modicum of relief, Kristina Busse points out, "The danger to fan culture has become the co-optation and colonization of fan creations, interactions, and spaces rather than earlier fan generations' fears of litigation and cease-and-desist orders" (2015).

Lack of understanding and/or desire to learn about standard fandom behaviors or desires can result in a range of disappointing ventures. Sometimes it’s not a matter of simple disconnect between the industry and fans, but rather a disconnect between various facets of the industry. For example, in *Wired TV*, Denise Mann highlights the lackluster results of marketing executives attempting to entice fans with content without including writers in that process. According to Mann, this led to the development of "a jumble of uninspired brand integrations, behind-the-scenes interviews, and contests rather than compelling and immersive story expansions" (2014, 10–11). This isn’t to say that fans would have no interest in those things, but rather that other, potentially more valued, approaches exist. Though it’s taken for granted that the internet makes it easier for fans to convey their wishes, that does not guarantee that those wishes will be acted upon in the desired manner. Part of the disconnect here likely stems from both a
misunderstanding of fans as well as a misalignment of goals. According to Digital Content Next, highlighting a 2017 PwC media report:

[2.3] Today’s entertainment and media companies must be “fan-centric.” And to remain competitive, they must use technology and data to attract, retain, and engage consumers. Content and distribution remain important factors in monetization and healthy survival rests on a positive user experience. Businesses built on occasional and noncommittal visitors are not likely to succeed. (Price 2017)

[2.4] Though this summary begins by directing attention to the importance of fans, it quickly collapses them in with consumers, users, and visitors, all of which can be interpreted quite differently. This collapse of terminology is not unique to this particular report, and it gestures toward the fact that though industry insiders may speak of wishing to appeal to fans, their sense of who fans are or what fans can contribute is not necessarily attuned to fan perspectives.

[2.5] Upon examining the types of contributions the Wynonna Earp team puts forth, the standard interviews can be found, but there’s much more. For example, two different transmedia projects, The Road to Purgatory and Purgatory Case Files, have been developed over the course of the two seasons that have aired thus far. Both projects built on a foundation of investigation, which both was thematically relevant and actively invited fans into the narrative. Additionally, both projects encouraged fans to work cooperatively, something that Earpers, who have become known for camaraderie, were all too ready to do. If indeed a show and/or network’s goal is to get fans to “circulate endorsements of television series and stars, entertainment content, and consumer products,” particularly in a way that doesn’t come across as a cheap ad, then thinking specifically about what might engage a particular group of fans is likely to be more effective than appealing to some broad conceptualization of what a fan is or wants (Gillan 2014, 4). Not only is such a choice likely to be more relevant to a given group of fans, but also a specialized approach conveys the desired attentiveness that helps to make fans feel more recognized and understood.

[2.6] However, as Suzanne Scott notes, "While these textual expansions and supplements are free, ancillary content develops alternate revenue streams for the industry via banner ads and embedded commercials, as well as being designed to reinforce the narrative value of the ‘primary’ television text" (2013, 321). With so many different outlets vying for attention in the contemporary media landscape, attaining active fan support has become a matter of survival for most shows, which Scott highlights elsewhere, arguing that the impulse is "more concerned with creating alternative revenue streams for the failing commercial model of television than it is with fostering a fan community or encouraging fan practices" (2009). Though some outlets and creators express less concern with ratings (at least publicly), having as many viewers as possible is still a fundamental part of the television industry. And it makes economic sense to utilize alternate means, such as transmedia projects and other industry-created content, even when seemingly contradictory to fan desires, to make up some of the financial difference stemming from lower viewership.

[2.7] Additionally, there’s a clear logic to cultivating a relationship with fans who can then actively promote and create for the show, which could in turn bring in additional viewers who might find themselves enticed by the fan activities of someone on one of their many timelines. Earpers continually advocate for Wynonna Earp on social media and have successfully campaigned for both second and third seasons. In fact, the third season campaign began before the second season started airing, which underscores the depth of the connection that many Earpers have to this show and the goodwill that’s been earned along the way.

[2.8] According to Jonathan Gray, "Much of the business of media...is conducted before watching, when hopes, expectations, worries, concerns, and desires coalesce to offer us images and scripts of what a text might be" (2010, 25). The fan endorsements that we do or do not see play a significant role in our selection processes. Despite prevalent negative stereotypes about certain types of fans, an overarching goal today is for viewers to extend their fandom into all facets of daily life rather than simply the timeslot in which a given show airs or the weekend in which a new season is dropped. In 2009, a tagline for the CW television network was “CW TV: see it, hear it, blog it, live it” (Gillan 2010, 26). The first half recalls behaviors that have obviously always been associated with television, whereas the latter gestures toward new possibilities supported by technological advances. Branding has also long been part of the television landscape, but what’s being conveyed here extends beyond historical conceptions. As Matthew Guschnan explains, "Branding used to be understood as primarily a top-down process initiated by marketers who use mass-mediated advertising to persuade consumers to believe in a product’s (superior) quality, value, desirability, etc. More recent brand campaigns extend branding into the realm of lifestyle or culture" (2012, 22).
The Syfy network echoes this sentiment in a current advertising campaign. Debuting in 2017, the "It’s a Fan Thing" campaign became a noticeable part of Syfy’s social media presence, being used both in self-referential tweets as well as when the account was completing related tasks, such as live-tweeting conventions. This campaign took off simultaneous to Syfy entering its twenty-fifth year of existence and fashioning itself as a home for fans of all things science fiction and fantasy, even programming that doesn’t air on Syfy.

In the first tweet that references the new tagline, the channel’s official Twitter account (@SYFY) says, "You are not alone in the universe. Welcome home. #ItsAFanThing" (2017). The accompanying video emphasizes the community inherent to being a fan, and highlights common fan behaviors, such as dissecting scenes and sharing theories on Reddit. Importantly, this behavior is not cast negatively, and the video, which is composed of people from seemingly varied backgrounds and identities, suggests that all are welcome and that it’s perfectly reasonable for fandom to become an important, if not the most important, part of your life. Subsequent iterations continue in the same vein, suggesting that if you exhibit any of the described fan behaviors, you’re "one of us," which is a fundamentally good thing.

Though this campaign began well after Wynonna Earp began airing and after Earpers came together, it’s easy enough to see how the promotion of such an ethos would help to further promote the positive affective connection that many Earpers were already feeling. And though Syfy has not acknowledged any explicit connection between the campaign and Wynonna Earp, the ethos of the Earper community seems central to the campaign, which began concurrent to the show’s second season. Additionally, while The Road to Purgatory was hosted on Tumblr, Purgatory Case Files is on the Syfy website, possibly suggesting that these various strands of fandom focus have become intertwined. Nevertheless, Syfy has to be careful about how it chooses to proceed with the campaign, because it runs the risk of skewing too close to what Guschwan refers to as brandom—"the pseudo-fan culture engineered by brand managers eager to cultivate consumer labor and loyalty while preempting the possibility of resistance that participatory fan culture promises" (2012, 26). Perhaps significantly, this campaign debuted on the heels of Syfy becoming recognized as a space for progressive representations, as evidenced by its production of shows such as Wynonna Earp, Dark Matter (2015–17), and Killjoys (2015–) (Fowle 2016). As such, Syfy constructs itself, both in marketing and in production, as a place of possibility. This is paired with a focus on connection and conviviality, as well as being a home for those who might otherwise feel outcast. From this perspective, it’s not strange or problematic for fans to devote a significant portion of their lives to Syfy’s shows. And if others don’t yet understand, no worries, because it’s a fan thing, and Syfy is there for you.

3. Earpers

Although similar to many contemporary fan bases, there are specific qualities attached to fans of Wynonna Earp that have helped establish the Earpers as a distinct community. A fan-created definition of Earper from Twitter user Brandi McCloud (@BrandiMcCloud) reads as follows:

A member of the Wynonna Earp fandom. One who demonstrates no chill at all times concerning anything Wynonna Earp related. One who fangirls hard over cast crew and anyone associated with Wynonna Earp in any way. One who embraces and supports fellow Earpers. May be ridiculously talented, funny, and/or resemble a unicorn. (2016)

As described here, many Earpers active on social media display a consistent interest in anything tangentially related to the show. Furthermore, the notion that the fandom is grounded in friendship is often echoed in posts. While it’s clear that Earpers are fans of the show, the definition is also distinctly attuned to particular non-viewing-related behaviors and emotions. This definition is notably representative of an affective commitment, which Robert V. Kozinets describes as a "highly committed and evangelical element of fandom, of the fan experience, that has drawn marketers, business consultants, and business managers to embrace wholeheartedly the identity of consumer-as-fan" (2014, 164). Though the Earper definition was crafted by a fan, rather than the Syfy network and/or creators of the show, its existence suggests that the desired emotional connection is in effect.

Given the dedication of Earpers, it may come as no surprise to find that several fan works have been, and continue to be, created. In particular, the romantic pairing of Wynonna’s younger sister, Waverly, and Purgatory police officer, Nicole Haught, is central to many of these creations. The strong sisterly bond between Wynonna and Waverly is
also a typical area of attention. Importantly, the *Wynonna Earp* cast, crew, and official Twitter account both acknowledge and encourage these works. And in some instances, fan suggestions, such as Nicole’s cat being named Calamity Jane, have been adopted by the show. Though fairly minute, such incorporations aid in demonstrating to Earpers that they’re actually being heard.

Perhaps one of the most notable fan productions related to the television series is *Tales of the Black Badge*, a podcast hosted by two fans, Bonnie Ferrar and Kevin Bachelder. In addition to episode recaps, the podcast also includes interviews with cast and crew members, sharing of *Wynonna Earp*-related news, and discussions of *Wynonna Earp*’s convention presence. Ferrar and Bachelder also host *Whiskey and Doughnuts*, a video hangout series that provides an opportunity for fans to come together to discuss the show and that also includes cast and crew members. That the cast and crew are willing to directly interact with fans in these ways on a semi-regular basis suggests an ongoing commitment, rather than an isolated metric-oriented one. Ferrar and Bachelder were invited to visit the *Wynonna Earp* set while the second season of the show was in production, further underscoring the show’s investment in engaging Earpers.

### 4. Official interactions

#### 4.1

Though the methods via which television shows are able to interact with fans like Earpers have multiplied in recent years, there’s no set rule book for how those interactions should occur. Given the prevalence of social media, it’s obvious why television shows would attempt to reach viewers in such spaces. In the case of *Wynonna Earp* in particular, an organized effort, via multiple modes, has gone into nurturing the relationship with fans. To see how this has taken shape, one of the most obvious spaces to consider is the show’s official Twitter account, @WynonnaEarp.

#### 4.2

Since its inception, the account has undertaken several measures to reach fans, including both encouraging and promoting fan works as well as developing the aforementioned transmedia projects. As Karen Frost explains, "@WynonnaEarp draws fans in with its light-hearted, inclusive ‘personality’ and interacts with them on multiple levels through its tweets and retweets, embracing with more than open arms its queer fans" (2016). In other words, the account serves to reinforce and expand upon the inclusive tenets that have become markers of both Earpers and the *Wynonna Earp* television series itself. Frost goes on to provide specific examples of how the account makes transparent its support of all things queer, such as shipping *Game of Thrones*’ (2011–) Daenerys Targaryen and Yara Greyjoy, providing information about donating blood after the Pulse nightclub shooting, and soliciting responses to queer fan fiction prompts (2016). Each of these acts clearly marks @WynonnaEarp’s awareness of and respect for what is likely a significant portion of the show’s fandom. From my observations of and interactions with fellow Earpers, many of those who identify as part of the fandom also identify as female and/or as members of the queer community. That the show is aware of this component of its audience is not revolutionary. In fact, several television shows—including The CW’s *The 100* (2014–)—have been criticized for shrewd attempts to capitalize on the queer community’s support without following through on providing thoughtful queer representation. Throughout the series’ first two seasons, main characters like Waverly and Nicole, and supporting characters like Kevin, are more than plot points or tragedies. They have their own identities, moral compasses, and curious backgrounds, and each character also has an impact on the development of the series’ overarching narrative. The ongoing choices that *Wynonna Earp* makes both in terms of characterization and in its social media representation indicate a sustained interest in representing the queer community.

#### 4.3

In addition to Frost’s article, these actions have often been recognized by Earpers. As Twitter user Nic (@clonenic) says, "Dear Shows, Please look at how @WynonnaEarp treats its fans and learn something from it. Sincerely, The #Earpers" (2016). User zedface (@AliciaABL) echoes the sentiment with "Like… If there’s a way to engage audience at every turn, @WynonnaEarp does it right" (2016). These tweets serve as useful indicators of how Earpers perceive the show’s investment in the fandom. The tweets draw a clear line between a positive approach taken by @WynonnaEarp and lacking approaches taken by other shows. They also posit that other shows could and should learn from *Wynonna Earp*. As Twitter users, these fans effusively share their love with all of their followers, who may, in turn, choose to watch the show. Thus, Kozinets’s assertion that "The consumer, intrinsically motivated and loyal to the brand for life, entrenched in networks bound to the brand, becomes even more committed to the brand than any merely career-driven marketer or executive ever could" comes to fruition (2014, 169).
5. An interview with a social media manager

[5.1] In the course of working on this project, I conducted an interview with Natalie Zina Walschots, who serves as the social media manager for the *Wynonna Earp* television series, and agreed to provide some insight into behind-the-scenes operations of the account.

[5.2] Though it’s the case that most television shows today have social media accounts, the detailed business of running such accounts is not necessarily common knowledge. Indeed, we often don’t know who is running a given account, how they were hired, or how much oversight is involved. In Walschots’s case, she has served as the social media manager/community manager for *Wynonna Earp* since 2016. With a prior background as a writer and community manager, Walschots was brought in as a subcontractor via Digital Howard. According to Walschots, her job, broadly speaking, is to “manage the social media accounts and speak directly to fans.”

[5.3] Walschots achieves this goal in a variety of ways, such as posting live updates as new episodes air and helping to plan the show’s social media strategy. However, Walschots does not simply relay her observations about Earpers to her employers. Instead, utilizing her prior writing experience, Walschots “proposed, created and was the primary writer for *The Road to Purgatory.*” Given that the crafting of such a project is an extra undertaking to simply making and distributing a television show, one might surmise that a key component to developing a dynamic relationship with fans in the present-day is the willingness to engage in additional labor beyond previous norms. Indeed, in thinking about the cast and crew’s interactions with fans and the high level of responsiveness to a collective that massively outnumbers those that work on the show, it’s clear that having a less extensive social media presence would, to some extent, both be easier and less risky. At the same time, it’s quite likely that the recognition of the additional labor is one of the factors that contributes to the positive sentiment that Earpers maintain. Seeing that those working on behalf of *Wynonna Earp* are willing to go the extra mile increases feelings of being valued.

[5.4] For Walschots and her employers, the sentiment conveyed is that the possibility of goodwill is worth the risks. When I asked her about *The Road to Purgatory*’s creation, she described it as “a gift to the fans,” and she later added, “We were so supported by the fan community, and wanted to give something back.” Walschots clearly recognizes contributions from Earpers here, and her explanation also gestures toward fandom’s gift economy in which, as Karen Hellekson explains, there are “three elements related to the gift: to give, to receive, and to reciprocate” (2009). There’s a slipperiness to conflating industry creations with fan behaviors, especially given economic impulses and the misguided ways in which industry often approaches interactions with fans as noted earlier, and yet the fact that *The Road to Purgatory* was created at a time in which the cast and crew didn’t know whether the show would be renewed supports the genuineness of this reciprocation.

[5.5] According to Walschots, this sentiment extends from the top down. She explained to me that “showrunner Emily Andras made it clear from the beginning that she adored her fans and we tried to embody and express that care and affection.” In the numerous interviews that Andras has given since the series began, she often speaks of the fans in highly positive terms, such as those quoted in the title of this essay. When I asked Walschots herself to describe Earpers, she characterized them as “incredibly passionate, engaged fans who created a community that they wanted to see in the world,” indicating an awareness both of a perceived gap to be filled as well as the fact that though they may not technically be “in charge,” fans put in significant work to construct this community.

6. An ongoing negotiation

[6.1] It is important to place Andras’s engagement with her fans in the context of other showrunners—active or inactive—on social media. That television creators might want to maintain some distance from fans is not a difficult concept to grasp, if only to maintain a measure of creative control and to avoid sometimes complicated interactions with fans. Within the context of television, having relatively direct access to stars and creators assists in cultivating emotional attachments. To quote Gillan, “Twitter...allows viewers to feel as if they are part of the everyday lives of the actors playing their favorite characters” (2014, 259). This close connection fosters real sentiment. Thus, when it seems as if fan interests are being ignored or maliciously attacked, the resulting hurt feelings are effectively real.
Work_citation

[6.2] We can look to The 100 as one example of how such tensions can play out. Like Wynonna Earp, The 100 is a fantasy show with a devoted fandom, including several self-identified queer viewers. However, in 2016, those in charge of the The 100 found themselves at odds with many of those very same fans. In brief, immediately following the consummation of the relationship between two female characters, Lexa and Clark, Lexa was murdered. While the character’s exit was precipitated by the fact that her portrayer, Alycia Debnam-Carey, was leaving the series, the manner in which the exit occurred, as well as the subsequent response (or lack thereof) to fan grievances by showrunner Jason Rothenberg, became a significant flashpoint in the conversation about the nature of the relationship between the television industry and fans, and to the “Bury Your Gays” trope identifiable across television.

[6.3] While some cast and crew members were responsive in the aftermath of Lexa’s death, Rothenberg primarily remained silent, initially choosing only to engage with tweets that supported the narrative choice (Roth 2016a). This is one of many ways in which the approaches of Rothenberg and Andras differ. From following Andras on Twitter, one can see that she often errs on the sides of responsiveness and foresight, such as when she warns fans that something they might not like will be occurring in an upcoming episode. This transparency is part of what allows Earpers to feel taken care of. Though Andras likely would not want to give away too many details ahead of time, the fact that she is thoughtful enough about the fan experience to offer preparation promotes a sense of care for the fandom. When Rothenberg chose to selectively remain silent, some fans of The 100 responded in kind by unfollowing him on Twitter, an act that may not necessarily seem significant, but that serves as one way in which fans can clearly convey their disapproval (Roth 2016a).

[6.4] After some time, Rothenberg did make an official statement, which came in the form of a Medium post titled “The Life and Death of Lexa.” In the post, Rothenberg explains his decision-making process while also acknowledging that he failed to understand the gravity of the situation. Importantly, he states, “Knowing everything I know now, Lexa’s death would have played out differently” (Rothenberg 2016). This line could have potentially operated as a salve, an acknowledgment of the hurt feelings, and a sign that more thoughtfulness would be employed in the future. But when The 100’s panel at WonderCon predictably became focused on Lexa’s death during the Q&A, Rothenberg remained fairly committed to the belief that Lexa had to die (Lincoln 2016). During that Q&A, Rothenberg stated that the way he’d interacted with fans had “some way set up around this relationship an unrealistic expectation that Lexa would be OK, that she’d walk off into the sunset” (Lincoln 2016). The “some way” is a key issue here. Rothenberg expresses a lack of awareness and understanding with respect to the fans’ perceptions and expectations, especially given how the crew of The 100 had actively courted and reassured a queer viewership across various digital mediums.

[6.5] Given the lengthy amount of time over which these choices were made, it’s not too difficult to see how when Rothenberg claims ignorance with respect to fan expectations, it can be perceived as deceptive and disingenuous. Dany Roth refers to this particular set of actions as "the ugliest of all possibilities" (2016b). It’s not as though fans are unaware of the underlying marketing impulses inherent to these interactions. In fact, the We Deserved Better website home page—which galvanized criticism of the show’s treatment of its queer fans—states "No one is criticizing the writers/ producers/ creators of this content for using social media and interacting with fans, or promoting the popular aspects of the show, in order to pull in more viewers...But there should always be lines that shouldn’t be crossed" (http://wedeservedbetter.com/). To these fans, a serious transgression was committed for the sake of viewership and without any consideration of the emotional investment they’d been making, pointing to the need for emotionally attentive engagement by showrunners like Rothenberg, which failed to be executed in this case.

7. The self-aware showrunner

[6.7] In the midst of the furor over The 100, Wynonna Earp began airing. It’s unclear how much attention Emily Andras paid to that specific situation, which was only one of many television–fandom missteps. However, given the significant amount of mainstream press the situation garnered, such as in Caroline Framke’s “Queer Women Have Been Killed on Television for Decades. Now The 100’s Fans are Fighting Back” (https://www.vox.com/2016/3/25/11302564/lesbian-deaths-television-trope), it’s reasonably likely that Andras had some familiarity. Regardless, Andras has been explicit in terms of her awareness of the weight of her responsibility to Earpers. In an interview with Kyle Fowle, she notes that the sheer dearth of LGBT characters and complex female characters on screen is most likely the reason why fans latch on to these characters and shows with such intensity (2016). And bearing that in mind, Andras is aware of the need to respect that investment and not whimsically jerk fans around. In another interview, she adds, "Nobody wants to feel tricked, in
real life or when sitting down at the end of a hard day to watch something that is supposed to bring them pleasure” (Snarker 2016). This quote in particular hearkens to the crux of the matter raised by fans of *The 100* who spoke back to the show through social media.

[7.2] Andras’s explicit awareness has not gone unnoticed. In an article titled, “*Wynonna Earp* and Why TV Is Important to Me,” Alyssa Berkowitz draws attention to a moment in the show’s first season when it seems as if the character Nicole Haught might (but doesn’t) die (2016). Given that *Wynonna Earp* began airing during a resurgence of the “Bury Your Gays” trope on television, this particular survival carried additional significance. In fact, in what was then a fairly unprecedented move, Andras went so far as to publicly announce to fans that both of the show’s queer characters would survive the duration of the season, demonstrating an attentiveness to an audience in desperate need of some reassurance and also foreshadowing Andras’s future methods of precaution. Berkowitz distills the significance of Haught’s survival, saying, “The show was telling me that they have my back. With that scene they looked their queer female viewers straight in our eyes and said “We see you. We understand your pain. You matter to us. We care”” (2016). What Berkowitz highlights here is a clear emotional connection between her, as a fan, and the show. Social media’s existence theoretically provides the opportunity for more voices to be heard, but Berkowitz expresses the importance of action, which goes beyond just hearing. Given that the episodes had been filmed before the *The 100/Bury Your Gays* upheavals occurred, it’s notable that the narrative choice to have these characters survive wasn’t made as a reaction or as an appeasement, but as an indicator of thoughtfulness embedded from the beginning (Logan 2016).

[7.3] Though she is firmly in the camp of communicating with fans, as evidenced by her social media presence, interviews, and my interview with Walschots, Andras knows that tension can still arise as she continues to interact with fans. She specifically notes, for example, the difficulty in managing fan interests while also avoiding stagnation, saying, "As a writer, it’s very difficult. Because my job is to bring the drama. Again, I can’t necessarily have a couple sitting happily on a couch for four seasons. Like I think you will get bored of that” (Snarker 2016). Indeed, the dramatic ups and downs are perhaps amongst the primary reasons why many of us love our favorite shows, even though they can also be stressful and disappointing.

[7.4] Yet Andras finds communication with fans to have particular value because of its capacity to make space for marginalized communities. Such space making is what Andras describes as being responsible for the current surplus of good television shows (Fowle 2016). Furthermore, in a Reddit AMA that took place on the day of *Wynonna Earp*’s first season finale, Andras articulated a personal benefit to her ongoing social media engagement with fans. She explained, "I love twitter. It has allowed me to connect with the fans of my work in a way that makes writing feel a little less isolating as a profession” (2016). She also effusively declared, "This is the best fandom ever" (Andras 2016). For Andras, though there are potential downsides to the openness of her engagement with the fans, the good far outweighs the bad.

8. Conclusion

[8.1] When the *The 100* controversy was occurring, CW president Mark Pedowitz affirmed his support of Jason Rothenberg’s decision-making and storytelling. But he also notably said, "What Jason has done, Jason has done to himself” (Reiher 2016). Indeed, reaching out to fans in hopes of promotion is not industry malpractice, but ignoring the emotional stakes involved just might be. Kristina Busse notes that "fans tend to regard fan labor as a labor of love and as a shared passion” and it’s that very same emotional investment that puts fan labor at risk of being co-opted (2015). Though The CW renewed *The 100* for additional seasons following Lexa’s death, ratings have declined. And at the time of writing this essay, more than a year after the controversy, Rothenberg has only tweeted once since sharing his Medium post responding to the controversy, suggesting that he did take away some lessons from what occurred, but perhaps not the ones that best serve the future of fan engagement.

[8.2] According to Sarah Banet-Weiser, "We want to believe—indeed, I argue that we need to believe—that there are spaces in our lives driven by genuine affect and emotions, something outside of mere consumer culture, something above the reductiveness of profit margins, the crassness of capital exchange” (2012, 5). I’ve contended, throughout this essay, that the powers that be involved with *Wynonna Earp* understand and respond to this desire fundamentally. It’s apparent in every act and choice made with respect to interacting with fans. And particularly in a contemporary cultural context in which every single day’s news seems to bring about some new horror, it would make sense for fans to
gravitate to a space that conveys care, understanding, and a general sense of peace. While it is not possible to make sweeping proclamations about whether the **Wynonna Earp** model will be replicated across the industry, and this analysis has in no way been meant to imply perfection, it’s likely that other shows within the Syfy network may be influenced by **Wynonna Earp** as they craft their own relationships to their fans and as they operate in conjunction with Syfy’s new fan-centered campaign. Whether **Wynonna Earp** will be able to sustain the current emotional connection remains to be seen. But for now, much like a weather app that tells us—regardless of actual temperature—what we can expect to feel when we step outside, what matters most is what Earpers feel. And as of right now? It feels real.

9. References


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How Brazilian Whovians influenced BBC's strategies through Twitter: Fifty years of Doctor Who and fan engagement

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[0.1] Abstract—Doctor Who (1963–89, 1996, 2005–) is a remarkable example of how storytelling and marketing strategies can be assembled. Its fiftieth anniversary special was broadcast simultaneously in 2013 in ninety-three countries on TV (with a peak audience of 10.6 million on BBC One alone) and was also screened in more than 1,500 movie theaters after fan mobilization on Twitter. We show how this fan mobilization influenced the BBC’s strategy to broadcast the special in Brazilian territory.

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Social media; Social TV


1. Introduction

[1.1] Doctor Who (1963–89, 1996, 2005–) is well known as the longest-running sci-fi TV show. Its first episode aired on the BBC on November 23, 1963. Although it went on hiatus in the 1990s, the show returned in 2005 and completed fifty years on the air in 2013. That was when the BBC planned an international celebration with an anniversary special episode that was supposed to appear not only on TV but also on movie screens all around the world.

[1.2] This anniversary special was planned not only as a celebration but also as a key episode in the ongoing narrative. Additionally, it was intended to meet the expectations of fans worldwide, which included us: Brazilian Whovians. Although the BBC first planned to show the special episode in only three cities in Brazil, they changed their plans after Brazilian Whovians mobilized on Twitter.

2. Fifty years of Doctor Who

[2.1] The title of the fiftieth anniversary special was "The Day of the Doctor." Most Whovians eagerly expected to see two incarnations of the Doctor together: the Tenth Doctor, played by David Tennant, and the Eleventh Doctor, played by Matt Smith. They also looked forward to seeing the new incarnation, the Twelfth Doctor, to be played by Peter Capaldi.

[2.2] The main plot of the seventy-five-minute episode is the last day of the Time War (a war between Time Lords and Daleks that exterminated both races). The War Doctor, played by John Hurt, explains how this war ended. He, the contemporary Doctor (played by Matt Smith), and his previous incarnation (played by David Tennant) meet, along with their respective companions, in order to save the Doctor’s home planet, Gallifrey, from destruction.
The special was shown in more than ninety countries and in fifteen languages in more than 1,500 movie theaters all over the globe, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Australia, Canada, Latin America, Germany, Russia, and Scandinavia:

In the run up to the 50th Anniversary, fans of the show across the world have been out in full force to be part of a global event. In Sweden and Norway where the programme has no client broadcaster, fans successfully petitioned to get their local cinemas to screen the episode. Similarly, fans in Argentina pushed a major cinema chain into showing the special simultaneously. In the US, an initial 10,000 cinema tickets sold out in 28 minutes without any marketing or advertising and in Germany, Cinemaxx, one of the largest cinema chains reported that the special had been the fastest non-movie pre-sale in their history. (BBC Worldwide 2013)

These impressive numbers earned BBC Worldwide a Guinness World Record for the largest audience ever reached by a TV drama. Additionally, with the simulcast of this episode, BBC One (2013a) drew a peak audience of 10.6 million. As well as the ticket sales and the TV audience numbers, other numbers are also remarkable: the number of fans interacting, expressing their expectations on social media, rejoicing together, and even striving to get their favorite show to air in their countries.

3. Strategies to promote the anniversary special

The episode did not earn this massive audience by chance. The BBC knew that it would be one of the most anticipated productions in the show’s run. One of the first strategies the corporation planned was the revelation of the Twelfth Doctor after Matt Smith announced his departure from the series (BBC One 2013b). Michelle Osborn, head of communications for BBC One and BBC Drama, explained that they had decided to produce a live event within one month of Smith’s announcement (Lepitak 2013). She also said the announcement of a new Doctor should be a major event inside the narrative.

On TV, the live event attracted a peak of almost seven million viewers, but the size of the internet audience really draws attention. The BBC’s Doctor Who website crashed, and almost 90 percent of conversations on Twitter during the broadcast were about it. There were over eight hundred million tweets sent using the hashtags #doctorwho and #petercapaldi (Brew 2013). The BBC also used viral marketing techniques to promote the special on Twitter, using the hashtag #SaveTheDay (figure 1) to reveal promotional material.

After the BBC announced that Smith would be replaced, it returned to highlighting the anniversary and the first appearance of Capaldi. In order to promote the special, the BBC released two mini episodes. The first one, "The Night of the Doctor," was released on November 14 and starred Paul McGann as the Eighth Doctor, who regenerated into the War Doctor (played by John Hurt during the anniversary episode). Another mini episode, "The Last Day," was released on November 20 and offered the point of view of an anonymous soldier during the fall of Arcadia, the main battle of the Time War. Both mini episodes were available on the BBC’s online iPlayer and its YouTube channel.

Besides these mini episodes, the BBC also developed strategies to gather fans all around the world. On the BBC’s Portuguese-language website, fans could register to receive emailed news and teasers about the anniversary.
They could also indicate their location and any fan clubs they belonged to, and see the same information about others who had registered (figure 2).

Figure 2. Screenshot of the BBC’s Portuguese-language website with a map of Brazil, with various colorful icons indicating locations and numbers of fans attending screenings of the 2013 *Doctor Who* fiftieth anniversary special, "The Day of the Doctor."

[3.5] As an example of the important role of social media in Brazil, Twitter was used by Brazilian Whovians to demand more movie theaters in smaller cities. The BBC and Cinemark took note of these demands and adjusted their strategies.

4. Brazilians fans get mobilized

[4.1] Although the BBC’s strategies, such as the #SaveTheDay hashtag, may seem small, we must remember their importance. The hashtag attained world trending status on Twitter because it was mentioned six hundred thousand times by Whovians discussing the fiftieth anniversary special.

[4.2] The adoption of an official hashtag is common among Brazilians in social media. According to Canatta (2014), 70 percent of Brazilians search the Internet for information while watching TV about the show they are watching, and about 95 percent of online conversation about TV happens on Twitter. Rodrigues (2014) supplements these data with the results of her research about TV live events discussions on social media. Rodrigues suggests that there is a direct relation between the use of an official hashtag by the broadcasting companies during live events and their adoption by the audiences in social media.

[4.3] Brazilian Whovians followed these trends pointed out by Canatta (2014) and Rodrigues (2014) during the exhibition of the anniversary episode. When the BBC first announced the it, only São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Porto Alegre were supposed to host showings. After tickets sold out in these cities, Cinemark, the movie theater chain, announced that other large- and medium-size cities would also show it: Belo Horizonte, Barueri, Campinas, Curitiba, Goiânia, Niterói, Recife, Salvador, São Caetano do Sul, São José dos Campos, Santos, and Uberlândia.

[4.4] This announcement of additional cities spurred fans in other cities to complain on Twitter, wanting it to be shown in their regions as well. Using the hashtag #DoctorWhonaCMK (the hashtag is an acronym for "Doctor Who at Cinemark") and the official hashtag #SaveTheDay, Brazilian Whovians put pressure on BBC. This move was led by the founders of the websites Doctor Who Brasil and Universo Who, and according to them, they were contacted by a BBC producer (figure 3).
Doctor Who Brasil coordinated its efforts with fans in other Latin American countries:

Together with the BBC, we organized a campaign with Argentina and Mexico with the hashtag #MasSalasParaDoctorWho, in order to get more theaters in Latin America. We created the hashtags #DoctorWho50noCinemark and #WhoviansUnidos in order to get them into Trending Topics...The BBC and Cinemark had a meeting and the BBC showed our engagement, and then Cinemark finally launched a campaign on Twitter, asking fans to use the hashtag #DoctorWhonaCMK with the name of their city. (Auxílio 2013)

Most of the initial mobilization was for more theaters. After the fans accomplished that, the new goal became more tickets. The protest hashtag #DoctorWhonaCMK faded and #SaveTheDay rose again, as a way to pressure BBC to offer more tickets in medium-size cities.

After that, Cinemark released two official statements. In the first one, Vitória, Guarulhos, Londrina, Natal, Aracaju, and Manaus were added to the list of cities hosting showings. In the second one, Ribeirão Preto, Cuiabá, and Campo Grande were also added (Diniz 2013). In the end, twenty-four Brazilian cities showed the special simultaneously, some in more than one theater.

After showing engagement through social media campaigns demanding additional showings and tickets, fan clubs also gathered at the movie theaters, to watch and celebrate the show's fiftieth anniversary. In Rio de Janeiro (Duarte 2013) and Belo Horizonte (Peixoto 2013), for example, fans organized events and attended in costume.

According to Thaís (Aux) Auxílio (2013), leader and founder of Doctor Who Brasil, both BBC and Cinemark had contacted Brazilian fandom:

In the specific case of the 50-year anniversary, they called us to warn about what should happen in Brazil, that it should take place in three movie theaters and that we were supposed to use the hashtag. In the end, a lot of people also posted it and it turned to be a great motto to a large mobilization on Twitter.
When it reached Trending Topics, Cinemark got in touch. Finally, 33 movies screened the special. (our translation)

5. Conclusions

[5.1] If on the one hand companies are improving their strategies to maintain their audiences worldwide, on the other hand the audiences also develop strategies in order to be part of the media process, as we have seen in this case study of Brazilian Whovians who mobilized via Twitter during the 2013 fiftieth anniversary special. When these Whovians mobilized, they helped the company reach a peak audience, as cities hosting viewings were added and movie theaters staged larger exhibitions as a result of the protests.

[5.2] Now more than ever, digital distribution and the ability to produce and broadcast media products worldwide offer companies new challenges to deal with global markets (Vieira, Rocha, and França 2015). One of these challenges is how to keep up with global audience engagement with global media products.

[5.3] As broadcasters’ strategies to keep their world audiences are becoming more sophisticated, fans have been playing more important roles in these processes. If Brazilian fandom had not mobilized, the Doctor Who anniversary special would never have reached such a large audience in the country; the BBC simply did not know how much demand there was for it. Collaboration between broadcasters and audiences is becoming essential to progress in the contemporary global media system.

6. References


SYMPOSIUM

Please Like Me and global TV flows

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[0.1] Abstract—This case study examines the formal and informal distribution of Australian dramedy Please Like Me (2013–17) via the now-defunct American digital cable channel Pivot and via fan culture on Tumblr. The contrast between Pivot’s failure to secure an audience and fans’ success in circulating the show offers an insight into the continued shift in TV consumption and the complex relationship between distributors and viewers.

[0.2] Keyword—Australia; Distribution; GIF sets; Global television; LGBTQ; Pivot; Tumblr


[1] Australian dramedy Please Like Me (2013–17) follows a group of millennial friends as they face sexual identity crises, mental illness, aging relatives, and changing family dynamics. Created by comedian Josh Thomas, Please Like Me premiered on February 28, 2013, on ABC 2. In October 2013, Pivot selected Please Like Me as part of its launch slate of programs. For subsequent seasons, Participant Media, Pivot’s parent company, acted as coproducer and distributor. As Pivot targeted a socially conscious millennial audience, Please Like Me fit into the channel’s brand. Please Like Me had already found its way to an American audience before it aired on Pivot, however: fans distributed it on Tumblr. Australian viewers promoted the dramedy in a Tumblr-typical way: through GIF sets and clips that center on main character Josh and his coming-out story line. Aware that many fans on Tumblr are always eager to discover new queer-friendly media, foregrounding Josh’s story was a strategic choice among Australian Tumblr users eager to share their new favorite show. Episode downloads that circulated via Tumblr enabled American viewers to watch Please Like Me and further spread the word. Despite the existing American fan base, strategic promotion of Please Like Me on Tumblr, and airing new episodes in the United States first, Pivot ultimately could not draw a viable audience for Please Like Me and its other programs. Pivot’s final day was on October 31, 2016. Participant licensed the last season of Please Like Me to Hulu for US distribution. While Tumblr has its own limitations (e.g., through Terms of Service), its users are not entangled in the complex corporate relationships of the global TV industry and ultimately offered more reliable access to the program.

[2] Please Like Me is not the first or only international program to find its way to an American audience due to fan distribution or to be the subject of simultaneous formal and informal international distribution. To name just two examples, anime has long been distributed this way, and German soap operas had their moment in the late 2000s (Annett 2014; Hellekson 2012; Schules 2014). Fan distribution in this case means circulation of TV episodes among a community already involved in a conversation about media with queer themes. In this sense, the fan distribution I examine is different from a more anonymous sharing of media on torrent sites, where users may never directly interact. In the case of Please Like Me (and other fan-distributed media), the circulation of episodes happens alongside sharing of GIFs, through episode discussion, and in conversation with other media texts. Please Like Me makes a particularly intriguing case study because of the relationship among formal and informal distribution in terms of platforms, target audiences, and fandom. In terms of platforms, Please Like Me moved from being aired in Australia first to premiering in the United States first, and then back to Australian premieres, all the while being shuffled between SVOD platforms and cable television (outside of the United States and Australia, Please Like Me became available on Netflix in many countries and on Amazon Prime in the UK in 2016, just to make matters even more complicated). As formal distribution streams shifted, fans filled in the gaps, providing consistent circulation and discussion via Tumblr. Moreover, Pivot’s target
audience of millennials interested in social justice overlaps closely with how Tumblr fandom is often imagined and with how many fans on Tumblr self-identify. Finally, Pivot’s decision to set up a Tumblr account and to participate in fan practices like GIF production to promote Please Like Me brought formal and informal distributors together on the same social media platform.

[3] One might expect that Pivot would have benefitted from fans’ informal circuit of distribution as their new dramedy was already familiar to and cherished by a core section of their target audience, but Pivot’s existence as a niche digital cable channel was too far removed from young people’s contemporary viewing practices; according to Jeanine Poggi (2016), it also had difficulty attracting advertisers due to its unrated status. When Pivot folded, Participant Media’s CEO David Linde released a statement that explained the company would continue to focus on media "to entertain and inspire social action" but not in the form of cable TV; rather, Participant wants to create "compelling content across all platforms" (Franks and Groves 2016). The reasons remain vague: "the changing media landscape" and the "best interest of all our stakeholders.”

[4] It is easiest to unravel the show’s complicated distribution by starting from the beginning. While the dramedy was originally destined for ABC 1, ABC’s flagship channel, the program moved to the digital channel ABC 2 shortly before its premiere. Press speculation about this move included discussion of ABC 2’s younger target audience; others argued that the show’s unapologetic queer content was the motivation for the move (Vickery and Devlyn 2013). GIFs and episodes of Please Like Me began circulating on Tumblr almost right away in March 2013. Despite fans’ eager embrace of the series, its future beyond season 1 remained uncertain until Pivot stepped in. Josh Thomas went so far as claiming that Pivot saved the program (quoted in Feeney 2014).

[5] Figures 1 through 4 illustrate a typical chain of posts that sets informal distribution in motion: a fan posts a Please Like Me GIF set drawn from early season 1 episodes, receives an inquiry about the source material, and then shares a way to watch the program. When shared files disappear from cloud storage sites, fans also try to provide new links to keep the circulation and access going.

**Figure 1.** Distribution chain, part 1: request for GIF set. Source: Tumblr (My Big Gay Tumblog). [View larger image.]

**Figure 2.** Distribution chain, part 2: follow-up Ask about the GIF set. Source: Tumblr (My Big Gay Tumblog). [View larger image.]
After fans had already circulated *Please Like Me* on Tumblr for months, Pivot included the program in its first night of programming on August 1, 2013. In an approximation of binge-watching, Pivot aired six episodes in a row (a strategy that Pivot continued with frequent marathons of *Veronica Mars* [2004–7] and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* [1997–2003]). Pivot also made the first episode of *Please Like Me* available on YouTube in July 2013. In a press release, then-president of Pivot Evan Shapiro characterizes *Please Like Me* as “the perfect show to launch our network. This show is unique and authentic, which speaks to the quality entertainment that we aspire to present to our target audience.” The same press release further claims that PLM “aims squarely at the center of the millennial mindset and life-stage.” Considering the immediate embrace of PLM by Tumblr fandom, Pivot’s assessment of PLM’s appeal to an audience of 18– to 34-year-olds rings true. The US premiere was advertised through sponsored posts on Tumblr and on a dedicated Tumblr account (while the show’s Tumblr is now only accessible from within Tumblr via the site’s search function, Pivot’s Tumblr account remains publicly accessible). It is unclear whether Pivot was aware of the existing fan base on Tumblr or chose to use Tumblr due to an increasing awareness of the platform as gathering place for fans, an insight that other TV programs began to share around the same time (Willard 2017). It is tempting to speculate that Pivot’s decision to acquire *Please Like Me* was shaped by an awareness of the show’s circulation on Tumblr. After all, Pivot offered a variety-style program, *HitRECord on TV* (2014–), to Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s HitRECord community, as a result of its existing online success.

Pivot’s engagement with Tumblr remained uneven at best. Averaging only about twenty posts per month, a quota that invested Tumblr users reach daily, Pivot’s Tumblr account displays original posts that serve as promotional material and lacks the reblogged posts that dominate interaction on Tumblr, with the occasional exception of a reblog from an affiliated account like the *Please Like Me* Tumblr. Pivot may have understood that Tumblr is an important platform for reaching out to fans, but their social media team didn’t understand how to use the platform in a way that engages fans. This is an odd contrast to Pivot’s tagline of “It’s your turn” and their encouragement to “join the conversation.” Other official Tumblr accounts understood much better how to imitate and adapt fan practices (Willard 2017). Josh Thomas focused on fan interaction on his personal Tumblr account; nearly all his posts are answers to fans’ questions. He also seems to have some insight into fandom, replying on January 8, 2014, to a fan’s question about where to post their *Please Like Me* art with “I think everyone agrees Tumblr is the place for fanart” (http://joshthomas87.tumblr.com/post/72652807611/i-drew-fanart-and-i-want-to-show-you-but-where-do). Despite this statement, he did not immerse himself into Tumblr culture, and he abandoned his account after *Please Like Me* ended. Judging by his active Twitter account, he much prefers that social media platform for fan interaction, self-branding, and raising awareness of LGBTQ issues.
 Participant Media coproduced Please Like Me from seasons 2 to 4. Jennie Morris, former executive vice president of acquisitions and operations at Pivot, stated in an interview before the launch of the third season that “it’s truly a Pivot original series now. We are the lead network so our executives are very involved in the script notes, the production and the show itself, and Josh is wonderful to work with” (Landau 2016, 43). Along with taking the lead, Pivot also premiered new episodes of seasons 2 and 3, shifting the distribution dynamic between American and Australian fans. Whereas Americans first gained access to the first season of Please Like Me from Australian fans, Australians relied on American fans for early access to seasons 2 and 3 (Please Like Me aired in Australia with a few days’ delay).

When Pivot went off the air in October 2016, the continued formal distribution of Please Like Me in the United States remained in limbo for a few months. Season 4 was in postproduction and set to air on ABC1 in November 2016. Once again, American fans turned to Tumblr as their main point of access to the program (figure 5).

Eventually Hulu streamed the fourth season of Please Like Me in January 2017 (after already acquiring the rights to stream seasons 2 and 3 starting in October 2015). On February 2, 2017, Josh Thomas announced on Twitter that there wouldn’t be a fifth season because the story had run its course: “Ultimately we decided this because we are really happy with what we’ve made and feel like it is complete” (https://twitter.com/JoshThomas87/status/827264352239570946).

Younger audiences’ disinterest in linear TV is the easiest explanation for Pivot’s failure, but it strikes me as too easy. The ratings and social media buzz around ABC’s "Thank God It’s Thursday" line-up, Freeform’s original programs, and Adult Swim demonstrate that young people watch at least some linear TV (although certainly with declining ratings). Moreover, Pivot’s decision to focus on programming with social justice and participatory culture elements was unusual and probably attractive to a portion of TV viewers. Boston Globe writer Meredith Goldstein draws on TV scholar Deborah Jaramillo to offer another insight: "The perfect audience for Pivot was actually me—an older-than-millennial who has time to binge-watch old favorites, is open-minded enough to consider new shows, and wants to feel better about watching so much TV" (Goldstein 2016). Interestingly, Goldstein discovered Pivot while channel surfing, not via Pivot’s social media outreach.

While Pivot ceased to exist, fans continue to participate in circulating TV programs beyond national borders. The latest international TV hit on Tumblr is Skam (2015–17), a Norwegian teen series that drew fans’ attention around the same time that Pivot went off the air. Skam became popular in the same way as Please Like Me did, with a coming-out story line and GIF sets featuring a young white gay couple. Tumblr fandom remains both persistent in its practices and predictable in its preferences.

References


Facebook, Twitter, and the pivot to original content: From social TV to TV on social

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Abstract—The next stage of social TV is here. Drawing on promotional discourses, I argue that Facebook and Twitter’s shift from distributors of television network programming to their own original content is a natural extension of industry practice, but not a particularly meaningful development for fan participation and engagement.

Keywords—Branding; Contemporary television; Liveness; Original programming


[1] Throughout the social TV era, Facebook and Twitter have been willing collaborators with the television industry, but mostly functioned as new platforms for television networks to distribute and promote their programming. In summer 2017, after numerous experiments and endless speculation, both companies officially announced plans to develop and distribute exclusive original content (Petski 2017; Kafka 2017). While there are legitimate questions about whether or not people want to watch longer-form programming on social networks, this is a predictable next step for these companies—and for the social TV phenomenon as a whole.

[2] From the industry side, the social TV era has been built on idealistic participatory discourses. In this framework, social networks offer fans more direct access to not only peers, but also showrunners, stars, critics, and network executives. Live-tweeting, Facebook pages, and viral Tumblr posts all supposedly bolster the power and scope of fan feedback.

[3] However, the actual processes throughout this period have been, predictably, about formalizing Hollywood–Silicon Valley relationships and channeling fan activity toward practices that reaffirm core television industry strategies. Twitter became a central place for television-related conversation because live-tweeting inherently promotes live viewing, something networks are still desperate to reinforce. Nielsen’s Social Ratings (http://www.nielsensocial.com/socialcontentratings/weekly/), which tabulate Facebook and Twitter activity, are equally intended to legitimize live chatter so television networks can try to sell advertisers on the value of unique engagements. The proliferation of branded hashtags, showrunner Q&As, social games, and Gifs all position the television industry as cutting-edge and responsive to fan interests, but in reality just create additional opportunities for networks to further integrate their brands into our everyday lives. Despite the host of start-ups hoping to make it big since the social TV rush began in 2010, fan and industry activity has coalesced around just a few social spaces.

[4] For social networks, the proprietary owners of the majority of social TV data, a stronger push into original content is an attempt to more directly benefit from activity already taking place on its platforms. Facebook and Twitter have years of information about user habits—popular conversation topics, premium periods of activity, most shared material, and so on—that their respective executives believe can be parlayed into viewer attention for new programming. This algorithmically driven development process is similar to that of Netflix, another entity that first partnered with networks and studios to ease the transition to new protocols (streaming video) before pivoting to a more directly competitive relationship with legacy media companies.
Yet, algorithms and big data aside, social networks are making the same move that companies have made during the maturation of each new distribution channel since the outset of television broadcasting. Networks licensed radio projects before creating their own material for a new visual medium. Basic cable channels moved from syndicated repeats and licensed films to more original offerings. Pay cable stalwarts HBO and Showtime experienced more cultural legitimation once they embraced scripted originals, and the same has recently been true of Starz and Cinemax, as well as Hulu, Amazon, and YouTube. The long narrative of television eventually bends toward distributors wanting to become producers so they can give viewers a reason to keep watching, subscribing, or, in this case, logging on. Social networks are simply following the script.

In their respective announcements, both Facebook and Twitter call upon the common refrains about liveness and real-time engagement for fans. The introduction of Watch, Facebook’s new hub for video content, much of it exclusively licensed, features a mission statement that calls for "Live shows that connect directly with fans," "Shows that engage fans and community," and "Live events that bring communities together" (Danker 2017). VP of Media Partnerships Nick Grundin said, "Our goal is to make Facebook a place where people can come together around video" (Petski 2017). Here Facebook speaks to the long-standing claim that television’s fundamental ontological nature is defined by liveness and immediacy (Feuer 1983; Ellis 1982). Whereas television producers have implied liveness with on-screen chyrons or direct modes of address (Uricchio 2005), Facebook has been more explicit in its celebration of liveness, branding its pre-Watch video initiative as Facebook Live. Likewise, Facebook’s repeated usage of the terms "fans" and "community" attempts to further foster what Nick Couldry (2004, 356) calls the "'shared' ritual center" so present in the experiences of both live broadcasting and real-time social networks. In a few promotional statements, Facebook Watch and its original content are pitched as for fans, and fandom is couched in watching live.

While Facebook generally keeps the spotlight on what its Watch product means for consumers, Twitter is more open about what its desire to become a new 24/7 live content network could mean for its relationship with advertisers. As COO and CFO Anthony Noto said, "We’re doubling down on our live premium content strategy—making sure that advertisers can reach an audience that’s connected, influential, as an opportunity to be part of what’s happening" (Castillo 2017). Noto hits many of the key buzzwords of social TV and digital media in general—live, connected, influential—but similarly leans on a basic television industry branding discourse by referring to Twitter’s content as premium. The executive could just as easily be talking about HBO, AMC, or Netflix. That Twitter—or Facebook, which of course has the same goal with Watch—would pitch its live content to advertisers is not at all shocking; it exhibits the classic notion that networks (television or social) believe there is more money to be made in original programming.

Twitter extends the broadcasting metaphor further with an ontological and organizational vision for its product. As Noto told BuzzFeed, "We think that is a great way to have the programming carried along with you during your day. Focus in on it when you hear something that’s of interest, but then maybe not be 100% focused on it when it’s not of interest. I did that myself during the debates" (Kantrowitz 2017). This idea of an always-on stream of content was in part inspired by Twitter’s one-year deal with the NFL for digital streaming rights to Thursday Night Football in 2016 (for which it paid $10 million). Though Twitter lost the rights for Thursday Night Football in 2017, it is considering a twenty-four-hour sports network where highlights, live event coverage, and user tweets all exist in one place (Jarvey 2017a). Given that other partners include news outlets BuzzFeed, Bloomberg, Cheddar, and The Verge, it is likely that Twitter’s sports network could be joined by other topical networks covering entertainment, technology, and finance (Jarvey 2017b). The idea, then, is to provide a skinny bundle of themed networks that are always on, complete with real-time social chatter. Or, as we have long known it: television.

Amid the emphasis on fans, community, and connectivity in the press releases and public comments, there is little indication of how Facebook or Twitter plans to cultivate any of those things beyond the basic providing of a platform for conversation, bringing the content directly to the "digital water cooler" (Tryon 2013, 123) already in place.
Video 1. Promotional video introducing Facebook’s new video initiative, Watch.

[10] Prior campaigns to distribute live content on Facebook and Twitter—including presidential debates and award show red carpet specials—have mostly functioned in the same way those formats would function on television, with an added ticker of real-time user commentary. The Facebook press release provides predictably vague promises, while simultaneously alleging that the company’s shift in practice is primarily the result of meaningful user feedback: "We’ve learned from Facebook Live that people’s comments and reactions to a video are often as much a part of the experience as the video itself. So when you watch a show, you can see comments and connect with friends and other viewers while watching, or participate in a dedicated Facebook Group for the show" (Danker 2017). Facebook’s plan for community building appears to be just a comments thread underneath a video window. The company’s first announced series is one starring TV personality Mike Rowe, where fans can potentially nominate members of their community, on the show’s dedicated Facebook page, to be celebrated by Rowe for "doing something extraordinary" (Danker 2017). This faux-populism has been common throughout the social TV era, perhaps most notably with Amazon Studios’ pilot seasons, where viewers were told that their star ratings and surveys would determine which new projects would make it to full series (Barker 2017). It is also the brand of do-good transformational social responsibility seen from television networks for decades, and from Facebook in recent years (Ouellette 2012, 62). What it is not, however, is an especially meaningful form of engagement or participation on the part of the audience.

[11] Twitter, meanwhile, is seemingly relying on the vernacular of its platform to inspire engagement among viewers of live content. In September 2017, Hollywood Reporter profiled BuzzFeed’s morning talk show AM to DM, the first series to emerge from Twitter’s original content plans. The show contains segments called “Fire Tweets” and “@ Us,” both of which are pitched as “in-jokes that will only make sense to people who spend a lot of time on [Twitter]” (Barr 2017). The vision to make a show for what BuzzFeed’s Ben Smith calls the "maniacs" on Twitter hints that it may be possible to translate the discursive contentions and minutiae from social TV—and social networks in general—into original programs. Yet, this strategy still fails to make room for fan voices beyond a host reading one of their aforementioned fire tweets.

[12] Facebook and Twitter’s plans to shift from one type of network to another make sense for both companies in the larger scheme of television history. Original content strategies, backed by years of information about user habits and tastes, could expand Facebook’s already-massive advertising generating machinery, finally give Twitter a path toward profitability, and further diversify their respective brands. The move also enables both companies to inch away from the fallout of the 2016 US presidential election, where they took—and continue to take—significant criticism for their role in the proliferation of harassment, hate speech, and fake news. Finally, the push toward original content will allow Facebook and Twitter to promote what one industry analyst proudly called “ambient digital video,” a phrase that recalls ambient media and advertising’s creeping encroachment into everyday spaces (Grainge 2008; Moor 2003).

[13] If the first generation of social TV products are any indication, Facebook and Twitter’s originals will try to limit any fan conversation or activity that doesn’t further the above end goals. For all the discourse about disruption and fan-
driven community, both Hollywood and Silicon Valley continue to hold traditional views on engagement and participation.

References


Fan reactions to The Leftovers and Twin Peaks: The Return

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[0.1] Abstract—Certain TV series, such as The Leftovers (2014–17) and Twin Peaks: The Return (2017), encourage their fandoms to solve puzzles, search for clues, and comb the internet for answers to questions. As a result of this work, fans can consider their readings of the series legitimate, even canonical, regardless of the producers' intent. Just as queer readings can be as valid as mainstream interpretations, these fan viewers use the language and strategies of alternative viewers to legitimize their own readings.

[0.2] Keywords—Fandom; Interpretation; Television; TV


I. Introduction

[1.1] Even before HBO’s The Leftovers debuted in 2014, co-creator Damon Lindelof was saying in interviews that the show’s audience should not worry about whether they would ever get an answer to what happened during "the Departure," the moment when millions of people all over the world suddenly disappeared. After the angry fallout following the finale of his previous series, Lost, Lindelof seemed to be attempting to prepare viewers not to expect answers from his new project. "These characters, on this show, are not actively searching for what happened in The Departure," he explained in January 2014. "They’re actively searching for what they’re supposed to do in their lives. Hopefully, that’s what the storytelling is going to echo" (Radish 2014). But despite his emphatic pronouncements, many of the show’s fans chose not to listen.

[1.2] Alexander Doty famously argued that his queer readings of ostensibly straight texts, such as The Wizard of Oz, are just as present as any other reading. He said that nonheterocentrist interpretations of these texts are often seen as delusional, suggesting that queer readings are traditionally reserved only for denotatively queer texts. For him, the queer gaze must assert itself, for it is as legitimate as the dominant straight gaze: "There is no need for queer canons that are marked as alternative or subcultural because queerness can be anywhere, in any canon you care to set up" (Doty 2000, 15). Spectators accustomed to existing outside the mainstream and under a system of oppression that limits the amount of cultural representation afforded to them feel emboldened by this oppositional queer practice. "In the context of a heterocentric (homophobic, sexist) culture, close reading often becomes a social and political strategy: perhaps through overwhelming details and examples we can make what is invisible to so many visible and what is denied possible" (55). Oppositional queer readings, then, are just as valid as dominant readings, no matter what text is being analyzed.

[1.3] This fact is worth acknowledging when thinking about texts that refuse traditional or conventional storytelling (in particular, the requirement to provide answers or closure), such as The Leftovers (2014–17) or Twin Peaks: The Return (2017), and the reception of these texts by their fandoms. In something I would describe as an ironic twist of fate, this spirit of opposition has led fans to develop more confrontational interpretations even for standard, rather than alternative or subcultural, purposes. In other words, certain TV shows invite their fandoms to solve puzzles, search for clues, and comb the internet for answers to questions. As a result of these activities, fans feel that their readings of the show are legitimate and even canon. Even if these readings go against the wishes of the show's creators, and even if
2. The power of one and the search for answers

[2.1] In the individualized social experience of television that comes with social media, streaming services, and on-demand viewing, taxonomies of identity and power are further complicated. It is worth interrogating what I call these "dominant oppositional readings," which tend to fortify dominant ideology by using the language and strategy of queer or racial oppositional readings. As Jacqueline Bobo said about the different responses to Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (1985), "Not only is the difference in reception noteworthy but Black women's responses confront and challenge a prevalent method of media audience analysis which insists that viewers of mainstream works have no control or influence over a cultural product" (Bobo 1988, 95). We are used to understanding marginalized spectators as exercising this oppositional power to take control of mainstream, dominant texts. But we are less prepared for current forms of fandom on Reddit, Twitter, and elsewhere providing the opportunity for all individuals to simultaneously feel that their reading is valid and that their interpretation is the marginalized, vilified one. This ubiquitous self-image as persecuted but legitimate creates an interpretive vacuum wherein the pleasures of fans’ individualist experience of TV storytelling contrast with their desire for control over their fan object.

[2.2] These dominant oppositional readings reject the unconventional narratives in these TV series. If *The Leftovers* or *Twin Peaks* seems completely uninterested in traditional forms of narrative closure or in answering audience questions, these fans feel warranted in their pursuit of hidden explanations. The popular *Twin Peaks* fan website Welcome to Twin Peaks ([http://welcometotwinpeaks.com/](http://welcometotwinpeaks.com/)) has a discussion board devoted to each episode of *The Return*. The one for the two-part finale contains more than eight thousand posts debating the series's mysteries and possible explanations, and many posters feel they have "figured it all out." For example, a user called SamXTherapy started a thread titled "why does the ending confuse people? Its so simple" to explain a theory (one of many). In a thread called "What if there isn’t an ending or resolution?,” SamXTherapy wondered,

> [2.3] Maybe there is no definitive story, point, resolution or ending, and the whole of it is a collection of stuff to create an emotional and/or cognitive response in the viewer. A true non-linear "story" that doesn’t actually do anything in the traditional sense of story...We keep coming up with ideas to make the whole thing hang together, which is a reasonable idea, since some individual sections make sense on their own. What if the whole thing doesn’t hang together, and deliberately so? ([http://welcometotwinpeaks.com/discuss/twin-peaks-part-17-part-18/what-if-there-isnt-an-ending-or-resolution/](http://welcometotwinpeaks.com/discuss/twin-peaks-part-17-part-18/what-if-there-isnt-an-ending-or-resolution/), post 1)

[2.4] Some users agree, but others refuse to. One responded (post 4), "I think you are correct, but I just can't accept it. It is a natural thing, to expect books and films to tell a story that leads to some kind of result, conclusion, solution...People naturally long to know what was the author’s intend, what meanings did he attach to what he laid out for us. I simply didn’t want to decide this story." Another said (post 32), "The Return is just confusing for confusings sake to teach us that life is confusing," and yet another argued (posts 53, 55), "Sometimes I can’t help but feel it’s something of a cop-out, though.” "If I wrote a story that had a definite meaning to it, and then I heard people come up with theories that were wrong, I’d feel the urge to correct them. I wouldn’t be saying, 'What’s important is whatever YOU believe it means.’" These debates, variations of which continue to rage, reveal not only how accustomed these spectators are to traditional narration, but also their desire for control over these texts. They feel challenged by a text that does not conform to the techniques of storytelling that they imagine to be universally satisfying, and fail to fathom why TV creators would willingly frustrate their audience through obfuscation and abstraction. For them, it is a function of human nature to search for answers, even where there may be none to be found.

[2.5] By comparison, the ending of *The Leftovers* in June 2017 ultimately fulfilled Lindelof’s promise by refusing to definitively tell the audience what happened during the Departure. Moreover, it left unanswered an even bigger question: whether the story Nora (Carrie Coon) told Kevin (Justin Theroux) about her time in the alternate reality where the departed supposedly went was true or not. The finale gestures at a possible answer, but does not confirm it. Some fans expressed their disappointment online. One tweeted, "LMAOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO I’M FUCKING UPSET FOREVER #THELEFTOVERS" ([https://twitter.com/thefinalbk/status/871547215285714945](https://twitter.com/thefinalbk/status/871547215285714945)). Reddit user bigphatmike,
referring to the lyrics to one of the show’s theme songs (“Let the mystery be”), created a thread called “I need Answers/opinions!!” and wrote, “let’s not let the mystery be and crack the case!” (https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLeftovers/comments/6vw2ky/i_need_answersopinions). Reddit user mle70 created a thread and wrote, “Boy what a pile of garbage. Every episode I felt like it was gonna be garbage, but I read positive reviews about the progression of the show and kept moving on. I wasted that time and so have all of you” (https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLeftovers/comments/6v7cb3/just_finished_the_series/). User foomy45 responded to another user’s rant about unanswered questions by summing up the problem succinctly: “You acknowledge that the producers said they weren’t going to explain everything, then rant about how upset you are they didn’t explain everything” (https://www.reddit.com/r/TheLeftovers/comments/6ndib4/i_have_some_complaints_about_this_show_am_i_the/ post 14). At the same time, many people sanctimoniously argued that the show was never about answers, and anyone who watched hoping to get them was watching it wrong. In a sense, they were similarly insisting on their own interpretation of the text’s ambiguities.

3. Better or worse ways of watching

[3.1] The difference in the case of The Leftovers is that Lindelof attempted to prepare the audience for what was to come (or rather, what would not come). On the other hand, David Lynch has rarely cared to explain anything in his work, including Twin Peaks, and certainly has little interest in traditional narrative expectations or even offering audience satisfaction. In both cases, some viewers seemed unable to accept this. Carrie Coon, who played Nora on The Leftovers, sees this inability as a natural human response: “We do want answers. We are built that way, and I am not supplying an answer to that question. The whole point is, it reveals more about the viewer than me” (Sepinwall 2017). This focus on the viewer is a welcome sentiment for those who value ambiguous storytelling or giving power to the consumer, but it can have the adverse effect of allowing individuals to assert the objectivity of their subjective experience.

[3.2] The social nature of these interactions seems to reveal a willingness to discuss theories, but also a tendency to insist on the superiority and authenticity of one’s own. In a TV culture that has rapidly become addicted to choice and convenience, as everyone can watch everything at their own pace and according to their own circumstances, viewers feel emboldened to assert that their experience is the "correct" one. But how correct are they? Jason Mittell summarizes this phenomenon of mapping and cataloging fictions: "Such modes of affirmational fan engagement prioritize canonical authenticity, seek narrative mastery, authorize the role of controlling showrunner, and search for connections and theories to fill narrative gaps" (2015, 316). Mittell, though admittedly concerned with different issues, fails to account for the power dynamics at play in these fan engagements. Interpretive power on the internet, as elsewhere, belongs to everyone, but readings of TV shows that embrace ambiguity and refuse normative storytelling correspond with mainstream practices. I argue that this posturing, which tends to assimilate the language and spirit of the alternative viewing practices of queer and POC spectators, is a solipsistic reaction to the power viewers feel in the modern hyper-individualized experience of their entertainment.

[3.3] This all raises the question: are there right and wrong ways to watch a television series? I am reminded of Immanuel Kant’s belief, outlined in his Critique of Judgment (1790), that when we consume art, we do so under the assumption that others ought to agree with our interpretation of it. This is a common, basic principle of how taste functions in a cultural society. For Kant, there exists a universal community of taste that we all subscribe to, and art is the means by which we can communicate our common experiences. When viewers watch Twin Peaks: The Return or The Leftovers, they can’t help but understand it in their own way, and can’t help but believe that others should be of the same mind. In this sense, the liberatory entitlement felt by queer or POC spectators to take control of mainstream art is a political byproduct of the fundamental entitlement felt by the oppressor class to have control over all texts, even ones that insist on their inherent alternativism. It is a curious function of cultural politics and fan discourses that these dominant spectators assert their experiential supremacy even when a text deliberately attempts to dismantle interpretive power dynamics. What this means for nondominant spectators and their methods of oppositional viewing remains to be seen.

4. References


Interview with Flourish Klink

TWC Editor

[0.1] Abstract—Interview with Flourish Klink of Chaotic Good Studios.

[0.2] Keywords—Fan works; Fandom; New media; Podcast; Transmedia


[1] Flourish Klink is a long-term fan, acafan, and professional fan. At age thirteen, she cofounded FictionAlley, which became the largest Harry Potter fan fiction community online. She also helped organize several Harry Potter fan conferences. She then continued her interest in participatory culture at MIT, where she wrote a study of Twilight fans for her SM degree in comparative media studies.

[2] Klink is a prolific writer and transmedia storyteller. She is the founder and coauthor of Alternity, a collaborative transformative Harry Potter alternate universe, which ran for seven years, as well as author of a variety of fan fiction throughout a number of fandoms. She designed, wrote, and programmed the text adventure Muggle Studies, which won a prestigious XYZZY award. She is also a board member of the Interactive Fiction Technology Foundation, which seeks to preserve and support the creation of all forms of interactive storytelling.

[3] After leaving MIT, Flourish joined the Alchemists as chief participation officer, where she oversaw transmedia and social media strategy for Hulu’s TV series East Los High (2013–) and was the lead producer and cowriter on the Transcendence: Origins mobile game for Warner Bros. and Alcon Entertainment. She is now chief research officer and partner for Chaotic Good Studios, where she develops and implements social media and fan strategy for studios, networks, and game developers across all media platforms.

[4] In 2015 she launched Fansplaining with Elizabeth Minkel, a podcast that mixes fannish, journalistic, academic, and industry approaches to media fandom in all its current forms.

[5] TWC Editor: You have been active in fandom for a long time. Can you talk about the ways it has changed over the past fifteen years and how you’ve observed those changes from your position within this environment?

[6] Flourish Klink: In my opinion there have been three major changes over the past fifteen years. The first is the transformation to a more visual fandom culture. Fandom has always been visual, but when I was first engaged in fandom, the visuals you were trading were JPG images, 600 by 800 pixels max. As a young person who didn’t have the ability to go to many cons, and who didn’t know anyone involved in the SFF [science fiction/fantasy] con scene, I don’t believe I ever actually watched a fan vid until YouTube came along, even though I had some sense of what they were. It simply wasn’t possible for me to get my hands on them. Free image hosting on Imgur or Tumblr created a second revolution in the level of visuals available.

[7] The second major change was the accessibility of fandom. Even though I was engaged with fan culture, I never had the chance to see a fan vid for years, because I didn’t have a connection into the SFF con scene. It can still be difficult to learn about some corners of fandom, but widespread internet access, combined with effective search, has really changed that experience. Now, if I want to learn about an obscure fannish topic, I can easily discover other people interested in it. I can find out that there’s a Dark Shadows (1966–71) convention two minutes after watching my first Dark Shadows episode, even though Dark Shadows hasn’t been on in years. And if I don’t want to go so far as going to a convention, I can easily chat with anyone who’s also watching Dark Shadows. But more than that, even if I’ve never engaged with fandom before these things will come up for me. In the Game of Thrones (2011–) tag on Twitter, the newest Thrones fan will interact with the crustiest oldest George R. R. Martin person who’s been following his career...
since before *Beauty and the Beast* (1987–90). Those people, that new blood, means that every new fandom is a feral fandom, as people used to call them. But equally, no fandom is a feral fandom, because each new fandom pulls in enough people who’ve encountered other types of fandom before to generally cohere with broader internet norms when talking about fan culture.

[8] The third major change is the way fandom interacts with The Powers That Be. This has gone through a variety of incarnations over the years—for instance, Star Trek fandom had a positive relationship with Gene Roddenberry for many years, of course. So I don’t mean to suggest that The Powers That Be hated fandom in the past and they’ve slowly been coming to terms with it (although some people like that formulation). But in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there was definitely a period where entertainment companies felt threatened by the internet and internet fandoms—a period that I saw the tail end of, and then saw how they began to come to terms with this. Today, I would say that the biggest issue facing fandom is not shutdowns, cease and desist letters, or anything like that, but rather the fact that what was once a small, vibrant subculture has begun mainstreaming (via the internet). As it’s mainstreamed, entertainment companies have taken notice and have begun using fannish concepts and ideas to sell their products. In one sense, fandom has won. The nerds no longer need revenge. But in another sense, the things that made early fandoms (especially SFF fandom and its media fandom relatives) vibrant subcultures are fading as the commercially viable parts of fandom are co-opted by entertainment companies. It’s a real tension.

[9] TWC: You are both fannishly and professionally invested in helping pro–fan interactions. Are there any drawbacks to this position, either within fandom or within the media industry?

[10] FK: Absolutely. I have recently found that it’s limited some of my fannish joy. The bigger the fan event, the less it’s actually fannish for me now. The San Diego Comic-Con, for instance, is purely a work function. (I find smaller cons easier, because they aren’t full of industry people.) And once you know too much about how the sausage is getting made in a particular show or franchise, it’s hard to be fannish in the same way about it. I’ve had to draw a few bright lines around properties and actors I don’t want to work with, because otherwise I know I would completely slip into a professional attitude.

[11] There’s also the drawback, fannishly and professionally, that I’m torn between two worlds. I want the best things for fandom and for individual fans, but sometimes my job requires me to set those desires aside and think purely about what will make a franchise the most money. Usually the two things coincide, but not always. Those are difficult days. I try to present both sides of things, but I know that corporations will always choose money, and I can’t blame them (#capitalism). I got involved in this work because I believe that fandom is going to become mainstream whether we want it to or not, and it only does good to have someone involved who’s going to watch out for fans’ interests, teach respect for fans and fandoms, and ensure that fans are dealt with fairly and not treated as simply receptacles for content. But of course working within the system always means compromise, and that is tough.

[12] Within my professional life, the biggest drawback is that there are a limited number of properties with large enough fandoms for my services to be necessary. There are relatively few new projects that feel confident enough that they’ll attract a fandom that want to hire me to work with them from day 1. That’s a relatively small problem; it just means that I have a niche, the same way that someone whose whole career has been working on horror movies has a niche. I think people whose professional lives don’t hinge on fandom sometimes are judged for being involved in fandom, but for me, it’s different. The nerdier and more outré by Hollywood standards I get, the better, because the whole point of working with me is that I can help very industry people understand their fans, and that means I have to actually do fandom myself. ("Have to." Ha!)


[14] FK: As a whole, I think networks see fans as a powerful way to keep their intellectual property valuable. As many people have lamented, the world is full of reboots now. These reboots, and their success, have taught Hollywood that the presence of a strong fandom can lead to a big payoff. This is especially important as viewerhip numbers have radically fallen and TV budgets have gotten bigger. If you can’t make money purely off advertising, then you need to make money in other ways, and those other ways to make money are all dependent on fandom. The only shows that can make it without strong fandoms are the most middlebrow of middlebrow—widely palatable sitcoms and cop shows.
So networks like Starz, SyFy, and MTV have rebranded and refocused on fandom to varying degrees over the past five years, with varying success, and the CW has clearly designed their slate to appeal to fannish sensibilities.

[15] People in the entertainment industry, even network execs, are typically pretty emotionally engaged with the properties they’re putting out. But they generally haven’t taken part in fan culture because they’re professionally engaged with the properties that fans are into. So they may be absolutely obsessed with Star Wars, but they may know nothing about the community that’s grown up around Star Wars. It’s a solitary kind of stanning, and one that they know how to turn off, because when they get into a professional context, they absolutely have to remain cool. That means, in my experience, that people can emotionally relate to fans, but they’re overwhelmed by fan culture. (Of course this isn’t always true—individuals are individuals!—but I would say it’s more true than not.) Unfortunately, this means that sometimes they tend to rely on pure numbers more than they ought. “We have a lot of engagement this month, and the algorithm in our social listening software says it’s positive; therefore, we did great.” Well, maybe, but you might be setting yourself up for a fall later down the line if the positive engagement is all around something that you never intend to happen—say, a queer flirtation that you never intend to consummate. This tendency is compounded by how very big these companies are. When you have one executive managing five or six different shows, he is likely to simply ask for the most consumable reporting on how fan engagement is going—and that means numbers, which are usually too simplistic to actually communicate what’s happening. There’s no nuance.

[16] This hugeness of the companies—the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing—is the thing that fans still and most radically misunderstand. This is even more the case with movies than with television shows. Movies, as projects, are handed off from a development team to the production team to a marketing team, in that order. Typically no single team is responsible for communicating with fans and engaging them over the course of that cycle. When Movie #1 in a franchise comes out, there’s a gap in which no one at all is messaging the public about the movie, because Movie #2 isn’t in development yet. So not only do each of these teams have many, many people on them (sometimes hundreds of people) but they also have discontinuity. In other words, it’s a miracle that anybody manages to have a coherent message about any movie franchise, ever.

[17] But humans are pattern-making animals, so fans tend to read way too much into every statement and decision made by a franchise, which can lead to huge disappointments. Ninety-nine percent of the time, fans need to use Occam’s Razor. Is the simplest explanation for this just "nobody thought too hard about it"? That’s probably the answer.

[18] TWC: In a 2016 article, you said, "Fandom isn’t broken. What’s broken is the way that fans and the entertainment industry communicate with each other." Is this still true? How can we improve communication?

FK: It’s definitely still true. I addressed how the entertainment industry could improve communication in my response to the previous question, somewhat elliptically: simply empowering consistent spokespeople to communicate with fans regularly, and speaking with authority, over the life of a franchise, would be a huge step in the right direction.

[19] Regarding what fans can do, unfortunately, the people who are most visible to fans—actors, directors, and writers—are typically not the people most empowered to make decisions that fans care about. Fans need to communicate with producers, studios, and networks, and they need to be aware that because the entertainment industry is a business, the way to communicate with them is primarily through money. (Prestige can also be powerful—for example, Mad Men [2007–15] was renewed despite low viewership numbers because of how prestigious it was—but fandoms typically don’t have the power to create that kind of prestige.) So fans need to use carrots and sticks to express themselves.

[20] The only real stick that the entertainment industry cares about is when people stop watching a show or attending movies, and that leads to cancellation or no more movies, which is not what fans want. Therefore, it’s incredibly important for fans to use carrots. When fans like shows and specific decisions made on shows, they need to show it in measurable ways, like watching on streaming sources that networks can track. Fans also ought to tweet from public accounts with lots of positive keywords using official hashtags, especially live tweeting. They need to tag advertisers to show that they’ve watched the ads. They need to buy merchandise from official sources, not only fan artists. Does this all sound soul crushing? From a fan perspective, I can see how it might. I certainly don’t want to buy the merch when it’s ugly, watch on a streaming platform that’s inconvenient, or tweet in an annoying way. But because the industry
relies so much on numbers, this is the best way that a relatively small group of fans can communicate their feelings and opinions.

TWC: This special issue "aims to put emerging research on social media platforms and ongoing work on online fan culture in conversation to consider the impact the proliferation of those platforms is having on our understanding of the consumption and negotiation of television." From your experience, how has the expansion of platforms like Twitter and Facebook reshaped fan–industry interactions over the past decade?

FK: The story of fan–industry interaction is a story of visibility. The ways in which fans are visible to each other, and to the industry, have changed a lot over the past decade. From the industry point of view, Twitter and Facebook are great ways to track buzz about any property. For example, the most accurate current forecasting of how well a movie will do is based on Twitter conversational data. They also provide a location to serve ads to consumers, allowing complex targeting that hopefully creates inexpensive awareness in the people who are most likely to see a show or film. These are the two most important roles they play in TV and movies. Because of that, it can be hard for TV and movie execs to see the difference between a casual viewer (who tweets or comments every once in a while about a property) and a committed fan. In the past, when the barrier to reaching out to the company was higher, only committed fans talked back through mail, conventions, and so on. Now the barrier is lower, but the industry hasn’t entirely caught up. Often they still see all commenters online as fans and consider all their comments in exactly the same way, not recognizing that the variety of behaviors within that group is vast.

Depending on how social media-savvy they are, actors, directors, and other public figures in the industry may share the same attitude as the broader industry, or they may have learned about the people who interact with them through their own engagement with social media and therefore have more complex models of fandom. These are probably much more accurate models than ever in the past, because they simply have more interactions with fans to extrapolate from. But the fact that these people are able to see a little more clearly often has to do with the fact that they aren’t also juggling massive marketing budgets and trying to hold the needs of the most committed fans in their heads in the same space as the needs of casual viewers.

In games, it’s slightly different. People in games are used to using social media, and before that forums, as a two-way conversational space. Companies like Blizzard Entertainment have for many years engaged their most passionate fans in fan-only spaces. So these companies are often more aware of the complexities within fandom, and—most importantly—they’re much more active in interacting with their fans than movie and TV companies are. (And of course, as we all know, YouTube is another thing entirely.) While game companies often empower multiple employees in widely varying roles (from QA to programmers to executives) to speak with fans on a regular basis, it’s rare for people in most roles in TV and movies to ever be permitted to interact with fandom. This hasn’t changed despite social media’s increased importance in everyone’s lives, and it’s a major problem.

In short, fans have become more visible to industry because of social media, but then, everyone’s preferences have become more visible. Therefore, sometimes distinctions aren’t drawn along the gradient from "casual viewer" to "deeply committed fan." This is both good and bad, but it’s certainly confusing from a fan’s perspective.

TWC: You were one of the first fans to realize that there was a potential career in managing fan–industry interactions. Is that still a viable career path? What are possible professional roles fans can occupy within the media industry these days? Is this a seat at the table or co-optation, or both?

FK: I’ve been around the industry long enough to have seen companies rise and fall, and individuals’ careers rise and fall (and to have had some rises and falls of my own). We are currently in the midst of a backlash on the idea of fandom. Companies have responded to social media campaigns that they interpreted as coming from fans and been surprised when their sales didn’t necessarily increase. Others have suffered from the wrath of fans—seeing their work trashed online by people who professed to be its fans. I have a million opinions about these phenomena, of course (and most of my opinions don’t have to do with fans being unimportant!), but the upshot of it for someone entering the industry right now is that it might not be the time to brand yourself an expert on fan culture unless you’re a journalist writing about these controversies.

On the other hand, I don’t think that there is any shortage of professional roles fans can play. There is always the need for social media and community managers. Those roles can be a pink ghetto, though, and there are many other...
roles fans can and should be taking. We've seen vidders become film editors. More and more screenwriters who are open about the way that fan fiction helped them learn to nail tone in their scripts. These are roles that build on the skills people use in fandom, but they're also roles where it's beneficial to know about fan culture. There's hardly a role in the entertainment industry, at least on the creative side, where it's not beneficial to know about fan culture. I really believe that fans, especially female fans, need to stop assuming that there's an unbridgeable gap between them and industry roles. Of course it's difficult—I don't mean to suggest that breaking into the entertainment industry is simple. But it's not impossible, and I hope that more fans decide to try.

[30] As for co-optation: what subculture has ever come into the mainstream and not been co-opted to some degree? When I decided to work in industry, I did it because I saw the tide changing. I understood that corporations own the things we are fans of. Therefore, I realized, they naturally will try to co-opt fandom—there's not even a question in their mind about whether this is right or wrong. (It's an arguable point: how much do fans owe to the creators and owners of the things they love?) And they will do it; they'll see it through. There is nothing that will stop them, and nothing could stop them. The only question for me was, if I don't try to advocate for fans from within the entertainment industry, who will?

[31] At the time I was making this decision, I couldn't come up with a single name. Today, I could come up with several, and I'm grateful for that.

[32] Some days are hard. Some days I feel like I'm a cog in the machine, working for the man, and that I'm not doing any good, not making incremental change, just lending authenticity to bad choices. But other days, I find that my research has led a project in great new directions, or I have the power to put my foot down on a bad idea, or I see someone powerful's opinions about fan culture begin to change, and I know that I've done good. I wouldn't want everyone in fandom to take the same path I have, because I think that there need to be people who work outside the system as well as those within. But all in all I think that the "co-optation" versus "seat at the table" balance has come out in favor of "seat at the table."

[33] TWC: In creating the Fansplaining podcast, you're occupying a new (and growing) role: that of professional fangirl, or perhaps fangirl as entrepreneur. What do you think of fandom's more entrepreneurial developments, from fandom journalism to podcasts to Kickstarter projects, fan films, and artist stores? Are there lines, and are they correctly drawn?

[34] FK: I'm not sure what "correctly drawn" means in this case! These lines are a site of constant negotiation, but the negotiation isn't just between fans and corporations. Of course those negotiations exist. But there's also the negotiation between fans and other fans. Is it right for fandom journalists and podcasts to ask for money? (I, as you might guess from our Fansplaining Patreon, say yes: it takes time and effort to create professional-quality commentary on fandom, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that, any more than there's anything wrong with an academic studying fan culture and getting tenure.)

[35] Then there's also negotiations within corporations. How much do entrepreneurial fans cost corporations? If people give Outlander (2014–) tours of Scotland and don't cut in Starz, Diana Gabaldon, or Ron Moore, is that really a net loss for them? The question is opportunity cost. If they would have set up official tours but are now being outcompeted by fans, that's one thing; if they never would have, it is probably worth it to them to let fans run those tours, because the tours help people get more and more invested in the stories and create an "evergreen brand." There's similar negotiations around things like what will degrade a trademark. This is something that is often invisible to fans; they only see it when a company sends a nastygram. But there are often widely varying ideas within that company about what is and isn't OK for fans to do.

[36] Personally, I am in favor of fans being entrepreneurial because I see it as a way that fans can gain power within the context of the entertainment industry. Money and viewership are the only two things that can make the industry sit up and take notice, and while I don't want every fan to take that route, I do think that it helps us all for some fans to do it.

[37] TWC: While the future is never certain, what would you anticipate to be the most significant space of negotiation in the future of fan–industry interaction?
FK: I’m not sure. A lot depends, in my opinion, on the way that the entertainment industry sorts out its financial models. Right now, different shows and films are financed in quite different ways, and these differences have knock-on effects with regard to how fans are treated. With a set business model, it would be relatively simple to understand corporations’ motivations in their treatment of fans as a whole, and work from there. But since properties have far more widely divergent models than ever before, there’s not a single set of forces working on any property or corporation that impacts their treatment of fans. Without knowing which model will come to predominate—or if a single model will come to predominate—it’s hard to predict what will become a space of negotiation.

One thing is certain: I feel sure that fan films will continue to be a site of tension. It’s simply too easy to make too high quality of a film—and the rewards for making fan films are too great. I consider this, though, to be more of an intraindustry problem than an industry versus fans problem, because the people who have access to the materials to make a fan film that will compete with industry are still largely involved in a professional capacity in some way. (That doesn’t make them not fans; it only complicates the positioning.)
Be him/have him: Brooker/Bowie

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In 2015, Will Brooker, professor of film and cultural studies at Kingston University, author of books on Batman and Star Wars and then the editor of *Cinema Journal*, decided to live as David Bowie for a year. This was done as research for a book on Bowie he was planning to write, a way of learning about his subject beyond traditional scholarly methods: considering Bowie's output as an artist, reviewing secondary sources, watching interviews, and reading Bowie's voluminous press. Brooker’s immersive research had rules: he would live Bowie’s trendsetting life in order, year by year, album by album, albeit in radically compressed time. He would submerge himself in Bowie’s cultural context—reading the books Bowie read, seeing the films Bowie saw, listening only to music from the moment in Bowie’s timeline he was occupying or before (figure 1). Brooker also traveled to many of Bowie’s geographies, walking the streets of Brixton, Bromley, London, Berlin, and New York, standing outside his house on Mustique, walking the train tracks where Bowie’s half-brother killed himself. Brooker also performed as Bowie, fronting a stage show with Bowie-cover act The Thin White Duke as his backing band. He dyed his hair—a lot—and then was knocked for a loop when his research subject (and alter ego) unexpectedly passed away halfway through the project, on January 10, 2016.

Figure 1. Screenshot from *Being Bowie* showing Brooker being interviewed on Danish TV about being Bowie; above left, Will Brooker; above right, David Jones as Aladdin Sane. [View larger image.]
The results of Brooker's experiment in performative research are now available: a book, *Forever Stardust: David Bowie Across the Universe* (2017), and *Being Bowie* (2016) (note 1), a documentary film/audiovisual essay about Brooker's year in performance made with editor Rebecca Hughes. Both projects show the impact of Brooker's research methodology, which he has sometimes offhandedly called "method acting" (note 2) but that is really a form of performance research not unlike that done by scholars such as Anna Deavere Smith and E. Patrick Johnson (note 3). Such scholar-artists answer their research questions not only through traditional scholarly methodologies—the "empirical observation and critical analysis from a distanced perspective" that Dwight Conquergood (2002) shorthands as "knowing that" and "knowing about"—but also through a mode of embodied research "grounded in active, intimate, hands-on participation and personal connection" that Conquergood calls "knowing how" and "knowing who" (146). The contrast, as Donna Haraway (1991) has expressed it, is between a "view from above" and a "view from a body" (196), and it is perhaps no surprise that this mode of research has been used by and for people for whom the body is unavoidable, essential, political: women, people of color, people of marginalized sexualities, subaltern groups of all kinds. The body knows things that no book thinks to tell you.

So while Brooker's embodied research methodology may be relatively new for film and cultural studies, it has a longer and deeper history in theater and performance, not to mention fan studies; in fact, an affective criticism that sees interpretation as tied up with identification and pleasure is even gaining ground in English lit, as we can see from Rita Felski's criticism of "suspicious" (that is defensive, critical, against the grain) readings of texts and her defense of "modes of enchantment." Felski argues in "After Suspicion" that "We can be taken hold of, possessed, invaded by a text in a way that we cannot fully control or explain and in a manner that fails to jibe with public postures of ironic dispassion or disciplinary detachment. James Joyce enthusiasts are no less obsessive and monomaniacal than *Star Trek* fans, and experiences of absorption and self-loss are not the exclusive property of swooning adolescents" (2009, 33).

Brooker, having set himself up to be thoroughly possessed and invaded by Bowie, thus refuses to perform "ironic dispassion or disciplinary detachment," something that's hard to do with orange hair and a lightning bolt across your face, in any case. But as Felski's reference to Star Trek fans indicates, Brooker is also enacting a way of knowing that has (in its recreational form) long been practiced by fans, who have various modes, including fan fiction and cosplay, of knowing by performing, enacting, and identifying. Brooker discovers new things about Bowie by, as his film title declares, *Being Bowie*; I've put it slightly differently in my own title, above, which refers to Constance Penley's description of slash as allowing fans both to be and to have their favorite characters (1992, 488); following this, I suggest that Brooker tries to get Bowie by being him.

And Brooker does, I think, convincingly get Bowie, even as he ultimately loses him, too, when Bowie dies midway through the film. Brooker certainly discovers new things about Bowie, though many of his most interesting insights are not—or not straightforwardly—in the book. In fact, Brooker rarely speaks directly to his own experience as Bowie in *Forever Stardust*, preferring to write in a more open-ended way that extends the opportunity of being Bowie to the reader. "We know the facts and we can still visit the locations," Brooker repeats throughout (53, 54, 66, 108, 111), as if demonstrating the difference between knowing that and knowing how, or perhaps where (figure 2). But Brooker does not narrate his own visits to Bowie locations, nor does he straightforwardly discuss the insights he gained while moving though the world in Bowie's shoes; these he saves for the film and for interviews about his process. Instead Brooker writes in terms of we and us, as if inviting the reader on his journey. "We can see for ourselves" or "We can see...as we walk." We are included almost physically—we see, we walk—which implies that we, too, are/were/will be David Bowie in some way.

Figure 2. Screenshot from *Being Bowie*: "We know the facts and we can still visit the locations." [View larger image.]
[6] In fact, Brooker starts his book with a list of people who have already been Bowie or whom Bowie has himself been: so, for example, David Bowie was Ziggy Stardust and Aladdin Sane; William Gibson and Hanif Kureishi have created characters based on Bowie; Jonathan Rhys Meyers plays Bowie-analogue Brian Slade in Velvet Goldmine (1998); Michael Fassbinder bases his performance in Prometheus (2012) on Bowie; Owen Beasley and Iselin Steiro play younger versions of Bowie in recent music videos, while Bowie himself plays other people; Bowie has played Nicola Tesla and The Man Who Fell To Earth and Jareth the Goblin King (1–3). "We should remember that Bowie is, on-screen and off-, an actor, with a mastery of many voices" (33) Brooker writes, and quotes Bowie early in his career insisting, "I want to act... I'd like to do character parts" (60).

[7] This is Brooker's primary insight in Forever Stardust and one that he mines thoroughly and interestingly throughout the book: that David Bowie was a character (or perhaps a series of characters) created by the man legally known throughout his life as David Jones and, as such, David Bowie lives on in various ways past the death of his author. In this sense, Bowie is more like famous biographical subjects like Oscar Wilde (always more famous for creating himself than for anything he wrote) (note 4) or transmedia characters like Sherlock Holmes (who in his thousands of interpretations has long transcended the influence of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle) than like authentic voices like Bob Dylan (note 5). Dylan tends to be framed as an expressive writer in the sense famously articulated by M. H. Abrams (1953) in The Mirror and The Lamp, which is to say, one whose work seems to externalize his own feelings and images; expressive art is the sincere and genuine expression of a writer's inner life and unique mind (note 6). Dylan's reputation as "a fierce and uncompromising poet" (Wyman 2013) and an authentic voice of his generation was recently capped by his being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2016.

[8] But Bowie's a different story; his performative stance means that he's often working more in what Abrams calls the pragmatic mode: that is, one that aims to produce certain effects on the reader/spectator/listener. This audience-focused mode is highly theatrical, in that most plays are judged by the effect they have on their audience rather than as an expression of the author's inner self, and Bowie is all effect a mile wide—or Across the Universe as Brooker's book subtitle has it. I think that Brooker would have written his book slightly differently if he'd adopted theater and performance studies language straight off; he'd have perhaps spent less time working to distinguish Bowie's modes of creativity from expressive forms of authorship: no one in the theater would "traditionally assume that a statement in the first person is a straightforward confession of intent" (30) by the author. Shakespeare is not Hamlet, and Brooker rightly rejects readings of Bowie's lyrics that treat them as personal or biographical statements: "We do not assume that Bowie genuinely 'just met a girl named Blue Jean' whenever he sings that line (30)."

[9] That said, it's fascinating to glean how much currency ideas of an expressive, authentic self must still have in rock criticism, considering how extensively they have been debunked elsewhere and how hard it is for anyone other than a straight white man to achieve this authentic voice (consider the classic dichotomies of punk versus disco, singer-songwriters versus boy bands). In fact, I'd argue that, regardless of whom he slept with, one of the queerest things about Bowie is the extent to which he is routinely characterized as a thief or magpie (note 7), so that Brooker has to spend many pages charting Bowie's various appropriations, homages, and thefts. Rock criticism apparently still expects its stars, like the romantic poets, to speak from the soul, and so seems to have trouble processing that Bowie is a great artist because he steals.

[10] So Brooker's achievement in Forever Stardust is to explain that Bowie's work is not conventionally (that is to say, expressively) authored (36), instead analyzing Bowie's promiscuous multimedia creativity in terms that also apply to remix, performance, and fan work: that is, as "a multifaceted network...a vast intertextual array of roles and persona, influences and analogues, fans and heroes" (4), "a creative collage or combination of previously expressed words, ideas, and signs, drawn from multiple diverse sources" (30). David Bowie is thus interpreted as a transmedia character, a series of behavioral strips (Schechner 2002, 28), a body sailing from text to text: a role that we ourselves can take on and that many of us have already taken on in musical/sartorial/sexual/attitudinal/visual/desiring and desirous collaboration with David Jones of Bromley. From this point of view, Jones was the originator of the part of Bowie, who is now being played by an army of fans and cosplayers and musicians and actors and fashion designers, and Brooker himself, in his performance-based research, is merely being more culturally honest than the rest of us, just as fannish cosplayers are unafraid to show the world how a story has affected their body.

[11] As such, it's in the audiovisual essay Being Bowie and in the interviews Brooker gave during his year performing that we really see what he's learned from embodying the role. The interviews are obviously part of the research in that
they put Brooker into a situation that David Bowie would routinely have been in: that of being a tall, outrageously dressed Englishman being jeered at by conventional people for doing something that the straight world (fans would say the mundane world) finds exceedingly odd. Brooker is self-effacing and candid enough to show himself taking no small amount of guff from talk show hosts and others interviewing him about his decision to spend a year in Bowie's costumes and platform boots. In one marvelous scene, Brooker—at this point in his research theatrically dressed in a copy of the Union Jack coat from Bowie's late-1990s Earthling period, complete with cropped red hair and goatee—is confronted by a Danish interviewer, who asks mockingly, "Can you give us an example of how this Bowie immersion results in relevant academic data?" (35:32). Brooker fields this question with wit and grace, but one imagines that it gave him a visceral sense of the self that must develop to handle media situations like these; Bowie himself took no small amount of crap, especially in the early days, for performing as an androgynous alien.

"I wanted to get a sense of what it was like for Bowie to inhabit those personas," Brooker says early in the film (2:00), "to wear the makeup and the masks," and the answers he comes up with are both specific and new. "It's very tiring. It's very, very, very tiring," Brooker reports (7:35), adding "as many women know. It's a lot of bloody trouble…it's a lot of trouble, and it's a lot of expense, doing your makeup, doing your eyebrows, getting your hair dyed, getting your hair cut" (figure 3). For the record, I have never seen a male critic have this kind of insight, and, as a feminist and a performance studies scholar, I find this kind of physicality to be strikingly absent from the image of the world as framed by mainstream male artists and critics, so I was delighted to find it here. This is the sort of insight that women turn to fan fiction to find; we want to know the stories of the body as well as of the mind: what people eat, what they wear, where they sleep. Brooker knows that Bowie stands a certain way at the microphone while singing because it's the only way to stand in the shoes he's wearing; this insight reminded me of the important but underreported claim that the painkiller addiction that killed Prince began as a way of coping with the crippling hip, knee, and spinal disc problems developed over a life lived in high heels (Friedman 2016; McPhee 2017; Bueno 2016). So these aren't trivial insights; our bodies define us, we are our bodies.

"Perhaps in a way you start to adopt some of his mannerisms, his style, his behavior," Brooker says (6:53), and tracing Bowie's behavior is not simply a matter of knowing what books he was reading (which Brooker does: Bowie's reading Aleister Crowley, Nietzsche, and "strange science fiction") but what his body was doing. In a voice-over to the film, Brooker says, "It looks like fun, but it was manic, it was breakneck, it was carried forward on its own momentum fueled by champagne and caffeine. If you listen to me in these interviews, I was so tired I could barely string a sentence together" (6:27). The body tells its own story, and Brooker's story is one of exhaustion, the compressed research time echoing, in some way, Bowie's own too-fast life. It is a story of eating only red peppers and milk for extended amounts of time and drinking too many energy drinks to mimic at least some of the heart-racing effects of Bowie's use of cocaine. It is the story of starstruck people looking at you, wanting to pose for photographs with you.

Brooker's embodied research pays off particularly in his analysis of Bowie's Let's Dance period. While Bowie became a mainstream superstar during this time, it is also the phase of Bowie's musical career that diehard Bowie fans tend to feel most alienated from. But after stepping physically into it, Brooker claims that it was his favorite of all of Bowie's personas. He reports that it felt very brittle to be this Bowie, whose costume and mask is characterized by "very, very hard, locked-down hair. The bright smile, which you might not feel, I suppose, all the time" (17:12). Brooker imitates Bowie's performance of "an easy laugh" (15:53) and claims that you might feel, living this role in the 1980s, that you "were wearing a uniform, that you were really really fitting in, that you were becoming one of the boys" (17:25). He concludes that being David Bowie in the production style of 1983 felt like pretending to be "the grownup I
wanted to be when I was thirteen years old. It was a child’s idea of a grownup” (17:41). Brooker brings a similar psychological astuteness to the Bowie of the lost years of June 2004 to January 2013. At this time Bowie was living a relatively quiet life downtown in New York City, wandering around in a newsboy cap and sunglasses. I saw Bowie myself a couple of times when he was in this phase of his life; he turned up once at CBGB’s 313 Gallery when Kristeen Young, a prodigy of Tony Visconti’s, was playing, I remember. Everyone knew he was there; nobody spoke to him. 

[15] “What does it feel like?” Brooker asks, dressed as Bowie from this era. He is directly addressing the camera. "It feels like being an old man. In disguise as an old man” (42:24) (figure 4).

Figure 4. Screenshot from Being Bowie: "It feels like being an old man. In disguise as an old man." [View larger image.]

[16] "The project was originally meant to be about David Bowie," Brooker confesses, right at the start of his film, "but perhaps it ended up being more about me." Much of Brooker’s academic work has been about fandom but not as personally as here; Brooker not only shares details of his family history and personal life but also does not hide the crisis provoked by Bowie’s death. While at a glance it might seem narcissistic, in fact these are works of fannish generosity. "This is my letter to Bowie," Brooker says at the start of Being Bowie, adding a moment later, "You’d write a different one" (4:05). It’s rare for texts to be this respectful of their audiences, this willing to grant that others may be fans, too: fans, experts, writers, critics, artists. Brooker articulates his ideas without asserting superiority or excluding what others know. Both Forever Stardust and Being Bowie invite their readers and spectators to play along, to become artists, to be Bowie. Ultimately, this is the lesson Will Brooker takes from David Bowie and from being Bowie: that we should all try to be "a bigger, better, brighter, bolder version of ourselves" (4:20). We in fan studies know that engaging with popular culture isn’t passive or a simple consumer activity; that it incites discussion, participation, performance, self-discovery. Being Bowie shows us how certain texts can provoke multiple forms of fannish engagement: personal, musical, emotional, performative, sartorial—and yes, scholarly. Brooker shows us fandom as an incitement to art.

Notes

1. Being Bowie (2016) is available on YouTube (https://youtu.be/06IzUmNMWsk) or at NECSUS/European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (http://www.necsus-ejms.org/being-bowie/).

2. In fact, it’s almost the opposite of method acting. Brooker actually seems to be working from the outside in—that is, assuming that if he dresses, stands, moves like Bowie, he will begin to think like Bowie and understand his mind. Method acting often works from the inside out: you try to understand why a character might act as they do by delving into your own psyche.

3. Anna Deavere Smith is famous for performance pieces like Fires in The Mirror (1992) about the Crown Heights riots in Brooklyn, Twilight: Los Angeles (1992) about the LA riots, and House Arrest (2000) about the American presidency. E. Patrick Johnson has performed his shows Strange Fruit (an exploration of gender and racial identity) and Sweet Tea (about black gay men of the south) at colleges and universities as well as stage festivals.


5. While Bowie’s alien artificiality may seem opposed to Dylan’s folksy authenticity, it is worth noting that, of course, Dylan was a Zimmerman just like Bowie was a Jones, and that Dylan, too, has become a character who can be played by other people, thanks to the deliciously pernicious postmodernism of Todd Haynes, director of Velvet Goldmine. In I’m Not There (2007) Haynes tops himself by having his Bob Dylan character played by no fewer than six different actors, some
of whom are female, black, or gay; in that way, Haynes and the New Queer Cinema arguably queer Dylan as a text, fracturing the single voice into a polyvocal multitude.

6. Abrams famously distinguishes expressive art from mimetic art (which aims to replicate the world) and pragmatic art (which aims to achieve certain calculated effects in the audience).

7. In this Bowie is like Wilde too; early in his career, a book of Wilde's published poetry was refused by the library at Oxford. They sent him a letter claiming that the poems were not really his work but instead were by "a number of better-known and more deservedly reputed authors...by William Shakespeare, by Philip Sidney, by John Donne, by Lord Byron, by William Morris, by Algernon Swinburne, and by sixty more" (quoted in Ellmann 1988, 146). Moreover, the famous anecdote teasing Wilde for stealing his wit from James Whistler (Wilde: "I wish I'd said that!" Whistler: "You will, Oscar. You will.") works perfectly for Bowie. You can fill in the blanks yourself: "I wish I could make music like Iggy Pop/the Philadelphia sound/Trent Reznor." "You will, David. You will.")

References


Controversies in digital ethics, edited by Amber Davisson and Paul Booth

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[0.1] Keywords—Gender; Participatory Culture; Privacy; Pseudonyms; Surveillance


[1] In his closing chapter of Controversies in Digital Ethics, edited by Amber Davisson and Paul Booth, Charles Ess notes that the changing media landscape increasingly makes journalists of citizens and media producers of audiences, while vastly magnifying the impact and distribution of daily media posts and interactions. As a result, he suggests that an increasing proportion of people are confronted with ethical quandaries that used to be restricted to specific professions. Therefore, he proposes that digital ethics and philosophy must become "ethics for the rest of us," as we must all reconsider our rights, responsibilities, and moral impact when navigating the opportunities afforded by digital media and social networking (316). Ess’s argument explains the dual importance of this edited volume both for fans and fan studies scholars. First, in adapting to the internet, web 2.0, and other platform migrations, fan cultures have been faced with a long series of ethical challenges in translating practices and community norms first developed for print culture onto the new infrastructure of the web, and dealing with the increased scrutiny created by the searchability of web content. Although fan cultures have their own specific history, some of the challenges they face are mirrored by other communities, and thus both fans and fan scholars may find relatable discussions within this compendium of issues like privacy protections for women’s sexual expression or concerns over monetization of user data. Yet, secondly, beyond our roles as fans or fan scholars, all of us who regularly use the internet may find Controversies in Digital Ethics useful in thinking through what it means to be a digital citizen and a member of digital communities, as these increasingly saturate our everyday lives.

[2] Lucy Bennett, Bertha Chin, and Bethan Jones coauthored the chapter most relevant to fans: "Between Ethics, Privacy, Fandom, and Social Media: New Trajectories that Challenge Media Producer/Fan Relations." There they tackle the thorny issues of how changes in online privacy norms have intersected with developments in media producers' commodification of and engagement with fandom. Beginning with the debacle wherein journalist Caitlin Moran asked Sherlock stars Benedict Cumberbatch and Martin Freeman to read slash fan fiction publicly, they tease apart the transformations in media and culture that led up to that moment. On the one hand, media corporations have recognized fans as valuable producers of revenue and free advertising, and consequently adopt strategies to legitimate and incorporate fans within official promotional activities. However, Bennett, Chin, and Jones note that this legitimacy has limits, as when slash fan fiction is held up as an object of ridicule. Likewise, many fans remain uninterested in the legitimacy promised by a closer embrace with corporations. Thus, many interactions between journalists or media producers and fans have the potential of becoming exploitative, as some fans have a considerable amount to lose from public exposure, and journalists and media producers have a monetary stake in reproducing and revealing fan works.

[3] As a result, Bennett, Chin, and Jones argue that journalists, actors, and other media professionals should recognize the ethical problems in suddenly bringing mainstream scrutiny onto fans and fan works that are not necessarily seeking the limelight, and who may be subject to public shaming. Their ethical intervention rests upon an
medical research, this can lead to problematic outcomes, as when the cancerous cells nonconsensually gathered from also that in many cases collective big data is transformed into private profit. Even in the case of a public good like their own public metadata, this would not be a satisfactory exchange for the harms such data might inflict as a result of expense of already vulnerable populations. Surely there are similar harms caused by exploitation of big data grave enough to necessitate even a costly and cumbersome system of regulatory oversight—for example, mass discrimination and stalking. On this point, the essay by Bennett, Chin, and Jones seems to suggest that for fans the trade-off proposed by Sylvia would not be enough to mitigate harms: that is, even if fans were given equal access to their own public metadata, this would not be a satisfactory exchange for the harms such data might inflict as a result of their loss of privacy and anonymity.

[4] Other chapters that may particularly interest fans and fan studies scholars include chapter 1, "Little Brother: How Big Data Necessitates an Ethical Shift from Privacy to Power," by J. J. Sylvia IV, and chapter 3, by Amber Davisson, "Passing Around Women’s Bodies Online: Identity, Privacy, and Free Speech on Reddit." Each presents a different perspective on the ethical and legal ramifications of digital privacy intrusions. As such, they deal with principles also discussed by Bennett, Chin, and Jones, ones central to many fans’ and fan communities’ concerns about how best to negotiate safety, sexual expression, and pseudonymity/anonymity in the online environment. Sylvia points out that existing privacy laws cannot adequately function in a big data era because it is impossible and/or meaningless to ask for informed consent to use data for purposes that have not been imagined when the data was collected, and because consent currently follows an all-or-nothing model wherein privacy must be abdicated to participate in modern life. Sylvia argues that because many secondary uses of data may benefit the public good, such as medical research, fraud prevention, and fire prevention, the costs involved in limiting secondary use of big data, that is, the rebundling and combining of data sets by third parties, would be too high. Sylvia therefore argues that instead of working to shore up privacy, we should instead think about big data as a matter of power, and work to equalize access to data in order to incentivize individuals to be "creative and productive" to "leverage data in ways that will improve the world or the lives of others" (27–28).

[5] The essay is strongest when detailing the many methods of gathering and combining data for which consumers are under-informed by contemporary privacy practices, which often incorporate difficult-to-decipher notices in the Terms of Service agreement that all personal data, user generated content, and activities on the service may become proprietary, and may be collected, repackaged, and sold with no further notice. Awareness of these threats to personal privacy builds media literacy, and impacts all fans who use privately owned platforms to host their fan activities. However, the essay is least-developed in fully fleshing out what kind of alternate regulations would be inspired by the author’s suggestion that power replace privacy in our approach to big data, and how these new regulatory models might mitigate harms and prevent misconduct. Sylvia repeatedly states that because there are so many potentially helpful uses of big data, secondary use should not be impinged on privacy grounds, as these regulations would be impractical and costly to implement, and could prevent future breakthroughs. However, this proposal does not consider whether a system that evaluates uses of big data might be implemented, whether major breakthroughs in the interest of the public good are worth any possible harm, and who specifically may be expected to bear these harms and reap the benefits. For instance, the institutional review board system that regulates research with human subjects and mandates fully informed consent is certainly costly, cumbersome, and prohibitive in some circumstances; yet this system is necessary to prevent the grievous harms that can be perpetrated in the name of research, often at the expense of already vulnerable populations. Surely there are similar harms caused by exploitation of big data grave enough to necessitate even a costly and cumbersome system of regulatory oversight—for example, mass discrimination and stalking. On this point, the essay by Bennett, Chin, and Jones seems to suggest that for fans the trade-off proposed by Sylvia would not be enough to mitigate harms: that is, even if fans were given equal access to their own public metadata, this would not be a satisfactory exchange for the harms such data might inflict as a result of their loss of privacy and anonymity.

[6] Additionally, although Sylvia develops an insightful Marxist model to understand the production of big data as a form of exploitative free labor, no similarly Marxist solution is offered. The ethical problems with big data are not only that these require individuals to exchange privacy for the greater good, opening themselves to potential harms, but also that in many cases collective big data is transformed into private profit. Even in the case of a public good like medical research, this can lead to problematic outcomes, as when the cancerous cells nonconsensually gathered from
Henrietta Lacks led to lucrative advances for pharmaceutical companies without compensation for her survivors. The Marxist opening of Sylvia’s essay suggests a solution like more collective ownership and distribution of the public goods produced by turning private data over to the public domain, as also posited in the works of scholars like Evgeny Morozov (2011). In some ways, fan communities model this communitarian ideal, as projects like the Archive of Our Own runs on an open-source basis, while traditionally the exchange of fan works follows a gift economy model rather than a capitalist model, as argued and documented by Alexis Lothian and Tisha Turk, among others (Lothian 2013, Turk 2013). As a result, studies of fan economies may offer the critical alternate economic models missing from Sylvia’s analysis, providing a fruitful space in modern analysis of data ethics for fans and fan scholars to explore.

[7] In comparison, chapter 3 by Davisson fundamentally prioritizes the unequal harms created by loss of digital privacy as she examines ethical ramifications of three case studies wherein behaviors and images women considered private became public on Reddit. Specifically, she analyzes the life-cycle of the Creep Shots subreddit, containing erotic photos illicitly taken of women in public; “the fappening,” a mass posting of photos hacked from celebrity women’s cloud accounts, and Facebook Cleavage, a subreddit containing nonconsensual reposts of women’s photos from Facebook to Reddit, intended as erotic material. She argues that a world in which women’s bodies and sexual expressions are always considered public property shames and stifles women’s sexuality. Consequently, her analysis bears striking resonance with Bennett, Chin, and Jones’s chapter on the stigma associated with drawing mainstream attention to female fans’ erotic works. Both examine the damage inflicted by not only loss of privacy, but loss of anonymity. Davisson quotes Scott Stroud, who writes, “...victims are harmed precisely because they lose their anonymity—they are raised out of the anonymous masses and connected to specific nude pictures...” (53). This connects to the fear of many fans: not that their fan works and activities are or could become public, but that scrutiny could draw undue attention that would publicly link their real-life identity to their fan works.

[8] Both in the case of fans and women’s images, the authors acknowledge that these cases require weighing one party’s right to privacy against another party’s right to free speech. Yet in each case, the authors argue that some populations become more vulnerable to digital privacy invasions, and ethical analysis ought to consider the way in which identity and privacy interact. Davisson writes, “The ability to express sexuality and develop a sexual identity is a key example of the way the right to privacy can enable the right to free speech. Violations of privacy in this area create a hostile environment for girls and women attempting to express free speech” (53). According to Davisson, free speech and privacy were historically symbiotic, protecting each other from government intrusion. Increased citizen surveillance afforded by digital media changes this calculus, as the most prominent threat to both privacy and free speech does not necessarily come from the government, but from fellow citizens, against whom, in the absence of clear law, moral arguments must prevail. Thus, Davisson’s article is a useful reminder that most examples of threats to fans’ privacy and free speech also do not come from the government, but rather from journalists, scholars, internet service providers, trolls, and fellow fans; consequently, fans share common cause with other communities struggling to create cultural norms and community protocols to both enjoy the freedom of expression fostered by digital space, and yet also construct some form of protection for their members.

[9] Although other chapters of the volume do not offer such direct significance for fans and fan scholars, they may nonetheless be of interest for any digital citizen interested in thinking through the unique rights and responsibilities created by the modern internet. Section 1 focuses on privacy, including ethical complications of using surveillance and leaks in journalism. Section 2 highlights ethical transformations caused by the growth of participatory culture, discussing the varying ethical stances taken by hacktivists, ethical structures of gaming systems, ethical problems with the rules of advertising contests, and codes of conduct that citizen journalists could cultivate to maintain credibility. Section 3 weighs codes for communication among professional advertisers, digital political strategists, nonprofit news agencies, journalists interviewing transgender people, and video game designers. Section 4 features identity issues, including the morality of interacting with intelligent machines, the potential of digital space to foster diverse representations, ethics of using digital vigilantism, contradictions between feminist goals and capitalist corporate values on for-profit blogs, and the representation of mothers in video game advertising.

[10] Overall, Controversies in Digital Ethics meets editors Davisson and Booth’s stated goal of illuminating “the issues that arise from our increased capacity to create, distribute, store, and process media,” and equipping media producers and users with “tools to make moral decisions” and foster media literacy skills (1, 3). As such, they provide fans and fan scholars with conversations that may be useful in navigating the role of fan within convergence culture, and the role of digital citizen. The volume does have some important blind spots, as few essays consider the intertwining of privacy and
property in as much detail as Davisson, nor do many chapters evaluate the conflictual meanings of ethical behavior in different spheres with the delicacy shown by Ryan Gillespie. One of the volume’s great strengths is its wide range of topics and disciplinary approaches; yet this diversity also sometimes works against comprehensibility and cross-disciplinary conversation, as authors sometimes do not define or consider the specific history of their terms, and rarely evaluate their subject from multiple ethical paradigms.

[11] Finally, it must be noted that the volume suffers from the same rapid cultural and technological shifts that it documents. Although the volume was published in 2016, it was likely written some time earlier, and some of the conversations already seem antiquated. As a result, as further allegations surface regarding the scope of Russian misinformation operations, magnified by citizen journalists and participatory culture "sharing," some conversations seem quaintly naïve, such as Shane Tilton arguing that citizen journalists must remain ethical to prevent the spread of false information as socially damaging as the greatly exaggerated reports of Steve Jobs’s death (152). Similarly, other warnings about dire future consequences of participatory digital media and big data’s unethical uses are not so much a dystopian future as modern reality. For instance, Sylvia quotes Mark Andrejevic, who almost seems to predict the damage to the public sphere wrought by reliance on Cambridge Analytica's big data insights by the campaign of now President Donald Trump:

[12] “At its most dystopian... This asymmetry would free up politicians to engage in 'infoglut' strategies in the discursive register (promulgating reports that contradict themselves endlessly, pitting 'expert' analysts against one another in an indeterminate struggle that does little more than fill air time, or perhaps reinforce preconceptions) while simultaneously developing new strategies for influence in the affective register. Fact-checkers would continue to struggle to hold politicians accountable based on detailed investigations of their claims, arguments, and evidence, while politicians would use data-mining algorithms to develop impulse- or anxiety-triggering messages with defined probabilities of success" (25–26).

[13] Because the pace of technological and social change has so greatly accelerated in the digital era, these gaps suggest important areas of future research that the essays in this volume may contribute to, and the open conversations that must be continued by all digital citizens, both in fandom and beyond, in the years to come.

References


[1] While media companies have attempted to harness the creativity and emotional commitment of fans for a number of years now, web 2.0 technologies in general and social media in particular are contributing to changes in the broader public relations landscape. In Public Relations and Participatory Culture, editors and authors Amber Hutchins and Natalie Tindall make the case that members of branded or engaged publics need to be categorized as fans and that fan studies scholarship can be used fruitfully by those working in PR to engage meaningfully with these communities. Moreover, they argue that fan studies would benefit from considering a more diverse range of activities associated with products and sports teams. So-called brand fans have often been ignored or portrayed in fan studies literature in a negative light, that is, in relation to the commodification of participation. Public Relations and Participatory Culture is an original although uneven attempt to explore synergies between fan studies and strategic and organizational communication.

[2] The book is divided into four sections. The first, “Foundations,” is made up of three chapters, the first of which is the introduction. In chapter 2, fan studies scholar Bertha Chin sounds a note of caution on the efforts of media content producers to engage fans; these efforts may be less about inclusiveness and promoting creativity and more about “fanagement” and containment/control. Sam Ford, who has done fan studies work with Henry Jenkins and worked in PR for a number of years, writes in chapter 3 that PR companies must go beyond serving the interests of their clients to serving the publics served by their clients—an important call, which if put into practice could mitigate the concerns raised by Chin.

[3] Part 2, “Theoretical Approaches to Public Relations, Engagement, and Fandom,” is made up of seven chapters but lacks a sharp focus. Chapter 9, “Gearing toward Excellence in Corporate Social Media Communications,” by Linjuan Rita Men and Wan-Hsüi Sunny Tsai, provides a set of best practices for the engagement of publics. The remaining chapters in part 2 provide short theoretical frameworks to set up a variety of empirical studies. The strongest and most relevant are chapter 6, “Gamification in PR,” by Michelle Katchuck; chapter 7, “Social Media Brands,” by Kelli Burns; and chapter 10, “New Media, New Public Relations,” by the editors. Katchuck offers up a number of case studies, from a Nike campaign to the release of a Coldplay album, to demonstrate the use of video game elements as part of a public relations strategy to make fans out of consumers, users, and even employees of a company. In addition to offering an interesting review of the literature of influence theory, Burns highlights the role of brand fan advocates and their use of social networks. She suggests that brand campaigns that engage advocates may prove to be more effective than the more established strategy of hiring social media/celebrity influencers. Chapter 10 is the only one in the section and
indeed the book that provides a true synthesis of concepts from PR and fan studies. Hutchins and Tindall draw on notions of engaged publics and participatory culture to put Ford’s advice to engage with fan communities into practice, going beyond the management of corporate-created sites and official social media Facebook and Twitter channels.

[4] The third section, "Brand Perspectives: Applying Theories of Public Relations and Fandom in Corporate, Government and Nonprofit Spaces," is made up of six chapters. Chapter 11, by Patricia Curtin, focuses on General Mills and the "manufacturing" of a community in relation to a gluten-free line of products launched in 2008. Similarly, chapter 16, by Richard Waters, examines "charged publics" in relation to the Disney Cruise Line through a study using focus groups drawn from a private Facebook group. In chapter 12, Jacqueline Lambiase and Laura Bright present data from interviews with public information officers from local EU governments on their role in engaging with citizens on social media. In chapter 15, "Riding the Wave," Jaime Ward discusses the ALS ice bucket challenge, a fundraising effort that went viral in 2014. Ward argues that this was a successful case of social media "clicktivism" being transformed into activism and suggests that other nonprofits might replicate the model. Certainly the bucket challenge was a fundraising success for the ALS Association but, since there have been no other successes like it, Ward’s argument is debatable. Chapter 14, "What’s at Stake in the Fan Sphere?," is one of the most interesting chapters in the section and indeed the collection. Amanda Kehrberg and Meta Carstarphen apply notions of fan identification and affect to analyze the association of Trayvon Martin, the black American teenager shot and killed by George Zimmerman, with Skittles, the brand of candy he had bought and had with him at the time of his murder. Skittles is a brand with an active social media presence. Yet when the candy became a symbol of social justice in social media campaigns, the corporation, unsure how it could respond to a larger social crisis about racism in America, remained silent. It was accused of indifference and, worse, of cashing in on the tragedy. The authors argue that the brand’s fans both created a communications crisis for the company and "helped the company to recover, better understand, and interact with its base in the future" (164). However, this final claim is never substantiated through empirical data, and the authors do not try to tease out the different fan identifications in terms of race and class, assuming instead a homogenous "Skittles fandom."

[5] The fourth and final section, "Stakeholder Engagement and Communication in Traditional Fan Spaces," should have been one of the strongest. However, certain chapters in this section would benefit from further development of their analyses and their connections to the other works in this collection. Chapter 17, by Melanie Bourdaa, Bertha Chin, and Nicolle Lamerichs, offers an overview of a few transmedia practices associated with the series Battlestar Galactica (BSG). The discussions of "world building" by actors such as Aaron Douglas (Tyrol) and Tahmoh Penikett (Helo), through their engagement with fans on social media after the series went off the air, and of the development of a BSG board game are unfortunately too cursory, no doubt because of the limitation on chapter length. Chapter 19, by Heidi Hatfield Edwards, focuses on fan discussion on the HBO boards of the final season of Sex in the City, a series that went off the air long before the existence of Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr. For this reason, there is a disconnect between this case study and the types of social media that enable promotional and brand cultures covered in the rest of the collection. In chapter 18 Justin Walden states that it is time for those studying PR to look at sports fan communities, but does not actually undertake such an analysis. However, chapters 5 and 20 do the kind of work that Walden is calling for. For example, in chapter 20, Jimmy Sanderson and Karen Freberg address sports organizations’ strategic decisions to engage or not to engage with fans in the face of controversy (and so this chapter resonates nicely with chapter 14). Specifically, they examine the reaction of fans to the Baltimore Ravens’ decision to live-tweet a press conference held by Ray Rice and his wife after charges of assault were brought against him in 2014.

[6] To sum up, Hutchins and Tindall have brought together a range of scholarship working at the intersection of PR studies and fan studies. They have made a strong case that this is a fruitful area of study to pursue. However, the uneven sections and the disconnects between various components of the collection suggest that an entire book dedicated to the subject may be premature. While it does not add a great deal to fan studies scholarship, Public Relations and Participatory Culture may well be of interest to PR scholars and practitioners.
Emma Keltie’s *The Culture Industry and Participatory Audiences* examines the important contemporary conjuncture that has resulted in the media industry increasingly encouraging audience participation. The book argues that “such participatory cultural practices are being colonized and capitalized by the culture industry” as well as that government regulations “operate to legitimize some cultural texts over others through funding and traditional distribution” (2017, 2). To do so, Keltie walks readers through competing theoretical models of dystopian (chapter 2) and utopian (chapter 3) approaches to industry-audience interaction. Keltie then offers an overview of fans and their practices (chapter 4) and outlines the media industry environment in Australia (chapter 5). Finally, Keltie draws on these threads to discuss her own experience producing *The Newtown Girls* (2012), a queer web series set in Australia (chapter 6).

Chapter 2, "The Culture Industry and Audience Agency," revisits Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s ([1944] 2007) *Dialectic of Enlightenment*—as the chapter title suggests—as well as that of other Marxist media theorists such as Louis Althusser (1971), Antonio Gramsci (1971), and Stuart Hall (2001). Keltie argues that juxtaposing such theorists with utopian views of participatory culture reveals that "tensions between structure and agency emerge" (13). By this, she means that Horkheimer and Adorno, with their dystopian view of media control, seem to foreclose the possibility of agency, while participatory culture utopians are at risk of positing total agency in a way that ignores the effects of structure. The chapter provides a good overview of these theorists for those who might need an introduction. However, several decades worth of more recent and nuanced work examining the culture industry, such as several articles by Mark Andrejevic (2008, 2009, 2012) and Christian Fuchs (2002, 2010, 2012) are strikingly absent.

In the third chapter, "Agency in Practice: A Participatory Utopia," Keltie describes how "participation occurs within the bounds of structured spaces that those participating did not create" (36). Much of the chapter engages with the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and, like chapter 2, it is a very helpful introduction to Bourdieu’s thought; students doing examinations come to mind as a constituency who would find it useful. However, as in the discussion of Marxist theorists in chapter 2, it’s not clearly explained why using this particular framework and exploring it at such length is the most productive choice for the book given how much has changed since Bourdieu was writing about the field of cultural production.

Chapter 4 outlines various fan practices, pointing out how media industries leverage them for their own gain. In this process, Keltie notes, "sanctioning of certain fan texts and fan interactions over others reinforces the inherent power structure of media distribution" (73). Readers of *Transformative Works and Cultures* may question how Keltie delimits fan cultures and practices. While the chapter purports to be a history of fan participation, it centers primarily on fan fiction. This creates the impression that fan fiction is the entirety of fandom. This narrow focus on fan fiction and the omission of vidding poses problems for the book’s analysis of the web series *The Newtown Girls*, since, for a web series, vidding is an additional and important precedent. As with the previous chapters, there’s also a marked absence
of engagement with contemporary work on fan studies. The chapter primarily relies on Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet (Hellekson and Busse 2006). While this is an important collection of fan studies scholarship, it was published in 2006, and it focuses specifically on fan fiction. Given this, while this chapter could be used as a primer for people who need an overview of fan studies up to the mid-2000s, there are several other short pieces that better serve the purpose, such as Gray, Sandvoss, and Harrington's (2007) introduction to the first edition of Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World.

[5] The fifth chapter, "Producing Culture: Australian Media and Creative Policy," provides an overview of the Australian television distribution system and government funding process. Keltie asks "to what extent, then, are governments enabling, or at least complicit in" the ways "the culture industry typically colonises new spaces carved out by agentic audiences" (79). Ultimately, Keltie finds that government policy has acted to preserve the status quo despite technological change. This chapter offers a comprehensive look at television in an Australian context and will provide a helpful lay of the land for researchers looking at Australian cases.

[6] In chapter 6, "Participation in Practice," Keltie turns to her case study, an analysis of The Newtown Girls, a web series that tells the story of a group of lesbians living in Sydney. Keltie was personally involved in this project, serving as co-creator as well as directing some episodes. Through their own free labor and donations from local businesses, Keltie and her collaborators were able to create and release ten six- to ten-minute episodes. Ultimately, Keltie argues, "whilst Web series, as a medium, offers a platform for creators to resist and challenge the culture industry by providing an alternative source of entertainment," they nevertheless are constrained by modeling themselves on TV and using corporate distribution platforms like YouTube (120). That tension, between the possibility to produce and the constraints on it, echoes the structure-agency tension set up in chapter 2. Overall, it is an interesting case study that differs from other accounts of researchers producing their own web series because of its Australian context.

[7] The book's final chapter asks how audience participation may be understood as labor and asks why certain kinds of participation are treated as legitimate and encouraged over others. Keltie argues that "authorised participation as a concept proposes the notion that participatory culture, espoused as a form of democratic engagement with the culture industry, is instead governed by structures that are contested and challenged by users" (133). These are vital questions with which many fan scholars are currently engaged, and Keltie adds a needed non-American case study to this scholarship. However, The Culture Industry and Participatory Audiences does not engage with this broader conversation. Given the Australian context for Keltie's work, it would be useful to hear how this context complicates the work of scholars like Suzanne Scott (2009, 2011, 2015), Abigail De Kosnik (2012, 2013), and myself (Stanfill 2013, 2015) who have focused primarily on US cases. Aymar Jean Christian's (2011) research on web series by marginalized people, published in Transformative Works and Cultures, is also notably absent, which is particularly unfortunate given that Keltie, like Christian, is writing about a queer web series that she helped to produce; a discussion of how her research has converged with or diverged from his would be fascinating and productive.

[8] Overall, The Culture Industry and Participatory Audiences introduces its readers to early work on culture industries and early Marxist media theory. These chapters may provide a useful and accessible history for undergraduate students. Chapter 5's overview of Australia's system for television funding and distribution will also be useful for researchers interested in an Australian context. However, the book's analysis would be richer if it used these foundations to connect to a broader range of contemporary scholars and theories.