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Editorial

Social TV fandom and the media industries

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[0.1] Abstract—Editorial for special issue, "Social TV Fandom and the Media Industries," *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 26 (March 15, 2018).

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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.

[2.2] 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.

[2.3] 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.

[2.4] 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

[3.1] 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 story line 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.

[3.2] 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 representation 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 França 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 Davison 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

[5.1] 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 story line 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.

[5.2] At the time, I was struck by how the efforts to make *The Fosters* more social fundamentally undermined the seriousness of that scene, that story line, 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.

[5.3] 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.

6. Acknowledgments

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[6.2] It is important to acknowledge the tireless work of the authors in this issue: they put significant work into developing and revising these essays, and they have collectively created a wide-ranging and dynamic collection of case studies. I would also like to thank the editorial board members of the journal who provided peer reviews for this issue, whose feedback was instrumental in assisting both me and the issue's authors to bring these articles to print.

[6.3] Special thanks to Flourish Klink for agreeing to participate in the issue, and the TWC editors for spearheading the Q&A.

[6.4] The following people worked on TWC No. 26 in an editorial capacity: Myles McNutt (guest editor); Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (editors); Cameron Salisbury and Francesca Coppa (Symposium); and Louisa Stein and Katie Morrissey (Review).

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[6.6] TWC thanks the board of the Organization for Transformative Works. OTW provides financial support and server space to TWC but is not involved in any way in the content of the journal, which is editorially independent.

[6.7] TWC thanks all its board members, whose names appear on TWC's masthead, as well as the additional peer reviewers who provided service for TWC No. 26: Caitlin Casiello, Kathryn Hemmann, Rukmini Pande, Kirsten Warner, and Erin Webb.

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