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SYMPOSIUM

The 100 and the social contract of social TV

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[0.1] Abstract—I explore how the controversy surrounding an LGBT story line on *The 100* (2014–) points to the shifting social contracts of social media engagement between fans and the TV industry, as well as the challenges faced by fans and critics who attempted to solidify that contract in the wake of said controversy.

[0.2] Keywords—Clexa; Industry; LGBTQ; Social media; Twitter

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1. Introduction

[1.1] As an Enlightenment-era political theory, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's concept of the social contract ([1762] 1920) spoke to the balance of freedoms in relation to authority, and how individuals are willing to give up some degree of freedom in exchange for social and political order. It is not a concept that maps perfectly onto the contemporary media landscape, but its abstraction offers an opportunity to explore the uncertainties of the online spaces where audiences and industry interact.

[1.2] There are no formal rules on how social TV is supposed to work. For audiences tweeting about their favorite shows, writers engaging with their fans, and networks trying to foster an active audience, social TV remains a loose collection of activities that are consistently being reshaped by different fan communities, individual producers, and enterprising corporate entities. While the facts of what Henry Jenkins (2006) identified as convergence culture are now widely accepted, how culture converges remains highly variable and under constant negotiation.

[1.3] However, one thing that all of social TV has in common is that those who participate are agreeing to an unspoken, undefined social contract operating in this space. As spaces like Twitter evolve, they are inherently liminal environments, where the barriers between audience and industry can seem to disappear. For both these groups, participation comes with a tacit agreement to an amorphous set of rules that not only changes regularly but is unlikely to be understood the same way by all sides.

[1.4] The social contract of social TV is crucial to understanding the ongoing negotiation of identity in these environments, both in terms of how fans and industry workers self-identify and how networks and channels understand the role of identity within the space of social media. Here I will not attempt to rigidly define this social contract but instead will use a notable controversy surrounding The CW's drama series *The 100* (2014–) in order to explore how the social contract is negotiated, violated, and ultimately contested by audiences and industry workers alike. Although this analysis can shed light on how the participants in social

TV could reevaluate their actions within this space to avoid such controversy in the future, this case ultimately demonstrates the futility of efforts to solidify this social contract, given the industrial hierarchies that social media elides but does not erase.

2. The case of Clexa

[2.1] *The 100* is a science fiction drama about a group of teenagers tasked with exploring a postapocalyptic Earth on behalf of their space station civilization, which has failing life support. Over the first two seasons, the show developed a small but devoted fan base, particularly surrounding its decision to make its lead character, Clarke, bisexual. Although she is originally paired with a male love interest, she eventually develops feelings for Lexa, the female commander of the 12 Clans, comprising people who remained on Earth and survived the aftermath of the nuclear holocaust. The relationship between Clarke and Lexa—known as Clexa—drew a significant LGBTQ audience to the series, with fan productivity on platforms like Tumblr (<https://www.tumblr.com/search/Clexa>) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&q=Clexa%20&src=typd>) devoted to shipping the two characters.

[2.2] However, fans weren't the only ones engaging with Clexa on social media. As with many series oriented toward younger audiences, *The 100* is a show where both its network and its producers are active on social platforms, in particular Twitter. Series creator and showrunner Jason Rothenberg and many of the show's writers were highly active on the platform in its first two seasons, encouraging the fandom in general but specifically acknowledging the emerging discourse and fandom around the relationship between Clarke and Lexa (<https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=Clexa%20from%3AJRothenbergTV&src=typd>). The term "Clexa" was also used by the show's official Twitter account, @CWThe100, and the official Tumblr of the show's writer's room posted and reposted content focused on the couple (<http://the100writers.tumblr.com/tagged/clexa>). The result was a social contract: fans willingly voted in polls and shared fan art, participating in the marketing of a series they thought was a positive representation. However, this came with a certain responsibility on the part of the writers and the network, which they met with content designed to appeal to and serve those viewers.

[2.3] Heading into the March 3, 2016, airing of 3.07 "Thirteen," *The 100* presented itself as the ideal convergence of television, LGBTQ representation, and social media: the show's progressive depiction of a same-sex relationship involving a lead character was embraced by the fans on social platforms, which was in turn embraced by the show's producers, who both acknowledged and engaged with this section of the show's fan base. But when "Thirteen" finished airing, with Lexa shot dead, *The 100* became a site of intense fan protest and harsh critiques of both the show's story decisions and the social media choices made by the show's writers.

3. The broken contract

[3.1] When "Thirteen" aired, Lexa's death was not a surprise to those tuned into industry trade discourse: Alycia Debnam-Carey, the actress who played Lexa, had begun work as a series regular on AMC's *Fear the Walking Dead* (2015–), which limited her availability to *The 100* and increased the likelihood of the character's death. It also did not come out of the blue for those fans who had been tracking appearances of the cast in their Vancouver shooting location via social media, who had noted Debnam-Carey's absence from the set after this episode. Contractual realities meant that a happy ending was unlikely for Clarke and Lexa, but the resulting backlash was not simply frustration with the couple's dissolution. In addition to concerns about how the circumstances of Lexa's death reinforced the "Bury Your Gays" trope (Snarker 2016), the central

conflict emerged regarding how those involved with the production engaged with fans on the topic of Lexa in the months leading up to her death. Essentially, it was a conflict over a broken social contract of social TV.

[3.2] On We Deserved Better (<http://wedesevredbetter.com/>), a group identifying themselves as LGBT+ fans of the show document what they characterize as "the blatant, callous manipulation we experienced at the hands of the creators, for over ten months." Distancing themselves from criticisms of the story decisions made regarding Lexa's character, they turn their focus on how the show's writer-producers—most prominently showrunner Rothenberg—on social media targeted LGBT+ audiences:

[3.3] We are specifically addressing the fact that a vulnerable minority group was used for promotion, for ratings, for numbers, and then discarded. Marketing centers on finding focus groups and finding ways to appeal to them specifically, as *The 100* did, but there are responsibilities that come along with using queer youth for promotion and marketing. *The 100* ignored those social responsibilities and ignored the effect that their actions would have on the group it used for promotion. (<http://wedesevredbetter.com/post/141051623833/if-you-are-unfamiliar-with-the-100-and-its>).

[3.4] The reference to "social responsibilities" here is important. The characterization of producers' actions as "manipulation" is, I think, an overstatement of the available facts. While Rothenberg and his writers continued to engage with Lexa fans after her death had been filmed and planned, and the showrunner made the poor decision to invite fans to watch what turned out to be a virtual reality reunion for the two characters being filmed for the season finale in downtown Vancouver while there was speculation about her death, the suggestion the writers actively colluded to manipulate the audience to avoid losing their LGBT audience, or that they had queerbaited them solely for marketing purposes, lacks evidence of such motives. There are incidents—Rothenberg's alleged conversation with a fan during filming (<http://wedesevredbetter.com/post/140771766513/we-read-too-much-into-things>), writer Shawna Benson's postings on a forum for lesbian viewers (<http://wedesevredbetter.com/post/141388433803/your-friendly-neighborhood-lurker>)—that I would agree raise specific ethical questions, but the rest of the social media engagement cataloged on We Deserved Better is strikingly ordinary: it comprised TV show writers tweeting behind-the-scenes details, tailoring their tweets to the most engaged viewers of their show, which in this case were undoubtedly the Lexa fans.

[3.5] At issue here is the fact that the social responsibilities of such tweets were not agreed on between all parties, meaning that activities producers likely understood as service to the social contract were retroactively framed as violations once Lexa's death was revealed. By all accounts, producers believed they were embracing their social responsibility by so openly engaging with the LGBTQ fan community, acknowledging them directly, and not shying away from the progressive components of a show that, even after Lexa's death, featured a rare bisexual lead character. But there are specific responsibilities in engaging with marginalized audiences that were either ignored or—more likely, given the lack of preparedness for the negative response to the episode—invisible to the show's writers. Javier Grillo-Marxuach, who wrote "Thirteen," told the audience at an ATX Festival panel on LGBTQ representation, "The failure was to recognize the cultural impact it would have outside the show...and to act accordingly outside of the show" (Stanhope 2016). Rather than the organized effort of the show's writers to manipulate fans into continuing to watch the show despite the betrayal of Lexa's death, the available evidence suggests that this was simply a case where the social contract of social TV changed without those generating social TV content realizing it had happened.

[3.6] I do not make this distinction to imply that the writers were not responsible for their actions, or that there is not a specific lesson in how these producers engaged with marginalized individuals within their audience. Everyone involved should have understood the increased stakes and reacted accordingly.

However, the reaction of the show's LGBT fan base—feeling manipulated and betrayed—points to the stakes of violating the social contract in situations where social media engagement moves beyond inane on-screen hashtags and cast live tweets, and intersects with the identity politics of the series, its viewers, or its producers. It also led to calls for an agreed-on social contract for how industry workers operate in these spaces, a logical but also futile effort that highlights the inevitability of these breakdowns of the social contract of social TV continuing in the future.

4. The limits of the Lexa Pledge

[4.1] Maureen Ryan (2016) opens her essay in *Variety* with a set of four rules, essentially a contract for TV producers to follow when engaging through social media:

- [4.2] Don't mislead fans or raise their hopes unrealistically.
- Don't promote your show as an ideal proponent of a certain kind of storytelling, and then drop the ball in a major way with that very element of your show.
- When things go south, don't pretend nothing happened.
- Understand that in this day and age, promotion is a two-way street: The fans that flock to your show and help raise its profile can just as easily walk away if they are disappointed or feel they've been manipulated.

[4.3] Shortly after, a group of both fans and writer-producers formalized a similar set of rules in the Lexa Pledge (<https://lgbtfansdeservebetter.com/pledge/>), which covered both the creation of LGBTQ story lines and social media engagement, asking television producers to sign on and "promise never to bait or mislead fans via social media or any other outlet." Both offer productive guidance that industry professionals would be well served to internalize as they write stories and engage with their audience online.

[4.4] However, the attempt to formalize these rules in the Lexa Pledge failed to gain significant traction, garnering only 16 signatures, with only a small number of writers active in the American television industry—its primary target, with respect to the Canadian television industry. Grillo-Marxuach was asked about the Lexa Pledge during the aforementioned ATX festival panel, but he noted that as someone who isn't a showrunner, he did not think he had the authority to make the kinds of promises being asked for (Stanhope 2016).

[4.5] However, it is possible that others chose not to sign simply because this question of not misleading fans is so inherently subjective: what qualifies as raising a fan's hopes? While writers should aim to be careful, is there any way to ensure that tweets are not understood as misleading—or retroactively framed as queerbaiting—by some audience members? The only way to absolutely guarantee that fans are not misled is to quit social media entirely, as Rothenberg effectively did after the backlash to "Thirteen." Is that realistic in an era where social engagement is so valued by networks? Is that the desirable outcome when direct engagement with the show's producers had been able to bring greater attention to the progressive elements of *The 100*'s storytelling in the first place?

[4.6] While the Lexa Pledge succeeded at bringing awareness to fan concerns and issues of LGBT representation, I would argue it failed to garner more significant support for two fundamental reasons that had nothing to do with *Clexa* or *The 100*. One is that it focused on personal responsibility in the collaborative environment of television production, where even showrunners are forced to make decisions on the bases of network mandates, financial concerns, or contractual issues that are outside of their control, and which may on occasion create story developments that run into the kinds of issues evident here. The second, however, is that formalizing the previously informal social contract of social TV limits the freedoms of industry professionals in ways that compromise their personal investment in the space. The liminality of

social media has been a boon to media industry workers, allowing them to articulate their contributions to the today's collaborative production culture (McNutt 2017), but taking on explicit responsibility limits their freedom to balance self-expression and show promotion in their activity. It asks them to take personal responsibility for a space in which their activity inherently blurs the line between personal and professional, placing intense pressure on their engagement that could lead many to follow Rothenberg's lead and exit the space entirely.

5. The future of the social contract of social TV

[5.1] These pressures are not unfair: as industry professionals, writers and producers hold positions of power that should require greater responsibility when engaging with their audiences on social media. It is also important that audiences use social media as a space to express their concerns regarding representation and to resist efforts that would limit their contributions in these spaces to marketing campaigns and on-screen hashtags. Fans have every right to rewrite the social contract of social TV in order to help protect marginalized audiences, just as the industry has the right to back away slowly when asked to sign it.

[5.2] The question is how these breakdowns of the social contract will affect the future of social TV. *Faking It* (2014–16) creator Carter Covington expressed his concern with the backlash against *The 100* and other shows portraying same-sex relationships: "I really wish we could change the conversation and become a glass-half-full fandom" (Stanhope 2016). But such efforts would deny fans the rights to use social media as a space of protest, an upending of the freedom of speech inherent to the social contract within these spaces. At the same time, though, it seems plausible that the industry could learn the lesson that the problem here was not the way the writers negotiated the controversial story line with their fans but rather the fact that they engaged with the LGBT fan base so readily, creating a social contract that industry would rather avoid, both in this case and others like it (see McNutt 2016).

[5.3] The best way to avoid a situation like the one involving Clexa and *The 100* would be to train writers and social media staff to understand the social responsibilities involved when engaging with fans in these spaces, and to better understand the social impact of their representation of marginalized groups.

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