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Special Issue on Digital Media Cultures



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Content

Introduction.....	2
The Work of iamamiwhoami in the Age of Networked Transmission Kim A. Knight.....	8
The Paratext Is a Flat Circle: Reading <i>True Detective</i> Katherine McLoone.....	47
It's not TV, It's Twitter: HBO's Branding Practices and Tweeting Quality and Distinction Cory Barker.....	73

Introduction: Special Issue on Digital Media Culture



Rosalind Sibielski

Digital technologies have created new forms of media, as well as new channels of distribution and exhibition. They have also transformed “old media” like radio, film, and television—not just in terms of production techniques, but also in terms of changing platforms and modes of engagement through which that media is promoted, disseminated, and consumed. From alternate reality games that both expand the diegetic worlds of TV shows or films and invite audiences to participate in them, to the use of social media as a site of fan interaction and production (not to mention a key marketing and promotional tool for corporate media producers), media culture in the Twenty-First century has become an increasingly digital culture, in which both content creation and consumption practices have expanded to encompass varying digital interfaces, as well as multiple screens of varying types on which “dual” forms of content are frequently consumed simultaneously.

In the process, media culture in the U.S. has become more diffuse, extending beyond the listening/viewing of media artifacts to include forms of paratextual engagement outside the

reception experience. It has become more varied, as streaming services like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and Spotify provide alternative venues and methods for music listening and film and TV viewing, as well as—in the case of Netflix and Amazon—additional film and TV content to that produced by Hollywood studios or the broadcast and cable networks. In some cases, it has also become more diverse, as content sharing sites like YouTube have provided a means for small, independent music, film, and TV producers to bypass record labels, movie studios, or TV networks and self-distribute their work, thereby also allowing for the possibility of more varied content that gives expression to points-of-view and representation to members of social groups that are either marginalized or invisible in mainstream media (although such content is still rarely seen outside of those who purposefully seek it out). And, it has become more interactive, encouraging more dynamic forms of media consumption through practices like live Tweet and “Tweat-peat” TV broadcasting (to cite just one example). Yet, at the same time, media culture has also become more rigorously structured by corporate media producers, who seek to harness these new platforms and modes of engagement in order to maintain control over when and how, as well as the terms through which, media is consumed.

This issue of *The Projector* examines digital media texts, the digital distribution and consumption of media, and the various forms of online communication and cultural practices surrounding media consumption that have been made possible by digital technologies. The essays collected in this issue seek to interrogate the ways in which the melding of media culture with digital culture has not only transformed media texts, media industries, and the ways in which audiences engage with media artifacts, but also the ways in which media is conceptualized on a cultural level, as well as how it is studied and theorized within contemporary media scholarship.

In “The Work of iamamiwhoami in the Age of Networked Transmission,” Kim A. Knight examines both the YouTube videos produced by the music collective iamamiwhoami and the production, distribution, and promotion practices surrounding them. Knight argues that the videos that comprise the *Bounty* series, which function in part as promotional tools for songs made available to audiences through download via iTunes and amazon.com, “are part of a larger viral structure that includes the media objects, discourse about them, remixes, and other elements of fan production,” that ultimately “reveals the structural formation of subjects in a networked media ecology and trains subjects for alternative engagements with their media.” In releasing the videos with no promotion outside of emails sent to select bloggers notifying them of their release and allowing them to circulate via “the digital equivalent of word-of-mouth,” in obscuring the identities of the singer featured in the videos and those responsible for the creation of both the videos and the songs featured in them, and by engaging audiences in a “cat and mouse” game to uncover the mysteries of the videos’ origins and their meanings through coded messages, links to outside online content, and other paratextual pursuits, Knight also suggests that the *Bounty* series at once challenges “release strategies and the industry-standard album structure “ by “play[ing] with notions of artistic identity and stardom,” and allows for a “a refiguring of Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura” through fans’ affective engagement with the videos, as well as their conferring onto the videos “a certain level of authenticity,” reconceived in terms of “the authenticity of perceived artistic motive” rather than Benjamin’s authenticity of the “original.”

In “The Paratext is a Flat Circle: Reading *True Detective*,” Katherine McLoone provides a different take on the ways in which paratextual engagements have shifted practices of media consumption by examining both the engagement in and the affective investment of TV critics and bloggers in investigating clues to the series’ central mystery (as well as its meaning) through

textual references to extra-textual artifacts and information. In examining “these off-screen engagements with on-screen storytelling,” McLoone traces this “new method of interpreting television . . . that depends on both formal criticism and new-media engagement with external information” in relation to critical evaluations of *True Detective*, in order to explore the ways in which they demonstrate “both the creation of a constitutive textuality and attempts—both failed and successful—to manage engagement with that textuality.” At the same time, she uses this case study to suggest that this shift in practices of TV viewing necessitates a concomitant shift in the way that television is studied by media scholars, but also how it is taught within the academic discipline of television studies. To this end, McLoone argues that this

new method of viewing, with one eye on the show and another on the Internet, directly impacts our students, who are being taught by television shows, and by their interactions with those shows, this new method of interpretation. An “education in television” happens in our classrooms and on our syllabi, but the education *of* and *by* television happens when our students mine a show’s *-pedia* for links to paratextual material, follow a columnist’s weekly recaps, or participate in an online discussion about possible interpretations of the latest mystery.

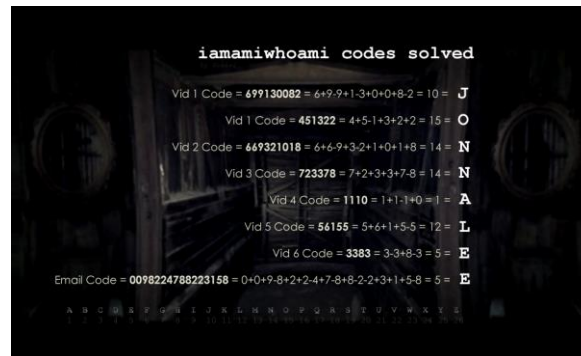
As such, she suggests that a new pedagogy is needed that equips students with “the metacognitive skill of interrogating the perils—and pleasures—of [these] new methods of engagement” with TV texts, in order to adapt to this “more vibrant, and more engaged, model of television, both in and out of the classroom, as a participatory experience.”

The final essay in this issue, Cory Barker’s “It’s Not TV, It’s Twitter: HBO’s Branding Practices and Tweeting Quality and Distinction,” takes yet another approach provides yet

another lens through which to examine paratextual engagements with media texts and their concomitant shifting of media consumption practices by exploring how corporate media producers use such engagements for both promoting content and shaping its reception. By analyzing Tweets released through the network's Twitter account, Barker interrogates the ways in which "HBO uses Twitter to underscore the "prestige" and "quality" of its original programming and its ability to attract major stars and creative auteur figures," a use that Barker argues is "consistent with how the network constructs its brand in other media," but also "illustrates the content and practices that are purposefully absent in the branding process." Thus, Barker suggests that while the promotional Tweets sent by the Network to promote its programming, as well as the re-Tweeting of content that praises that programming for its innovation and distinction, function to reinforce the network's brand, this very brand as a creator of "quality" TV necessitates a distance between the network and its audience that necessarily precludes the participatory interactions more commonly utilized by TV networks in their promotional Twitter accounts. Like McLoone, Barker also uses this case study to raise larger questions not only about shifting media consumption practices, but also how those practices are studied and evaluated within contemporary media scholarship. Noting that "Although the possibilities of participatory culture and a kind of 'direct' engagement with media companies can empower users to feel more like an insider than just a simple fan, cases like HBO signal that participation or engagement almost always come on the media industries' terms, and generally in ways that benefit their corporate interests above all else," Barker also suggests that further examination of social media platforms as promotional tools, but also specifically as tools for the branding of media products and/or producers, is necessary to "expand television and new media scholars' understanding of how the media industries have made themselves into a ubiquitous—

but not innocuous—presence in the lives of viewers/users, with branding often at the center of it all.”

The Work of iamamiwhoami in the Age of Networked Transmission



Kim A. Knight

On January 31, 2010, the science fiction author William Gibson hit send on a tweet¹ that read, “that putative Lady GaGa Virus is as seriously Footage-y as anything I’ve seen on YouTube.” The “Lady GaGa Virus” turns out to have nothing at all to do with Lady GaGa. It is a series of online videos that are produced by a collective called iamamiwhoami that is led by Swedish singer Jonna Lee, who had a few pop records prior to this project. Despite no traceable connection to GaGa, the iamamiwhoami videos are, in fact, “seriously Footage-y.” The production and circulation strategies employed by iamamiwhoami bear an eerie resemblance to those of the anonymous online videos called “the footage” in Gibson’s 2003 novel *Pattern Recognition*. Gibson’s fictional footage is a series of thirty-five video clips that are produced anonymously, released onto the internet, and spawn a devoted fan community. The quest to unveil the identity of the maker of the footage is the mystery that drives much of the plot of the novel. As with the fictional footage, the iamamiwhoami videos are produced and shared via unconventional means and are part of a larger viral structure that includes the media objects, discourse about them, remixes, and other elements of fan production. In this essay, I explore

iamamiwhoami as a non-standard media object, which includes its production and circulation strategies and the fan reactions. I examine how iamamiwhoami enables a refiguring of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura and argue that the videos function as part of a viral structure that reveals the structural formation of subjects in a networked media ecology and trains subjects for alternative engagements with their media through processes of distraction.

The iamamiwhoami name is a reference to the username of the *YouTube* account owner who posts the videos². The original sequence consists of 23 videos³ that began to appear in December 2009. In the first few months of release, the songs were available only via the videos on *YouTube*. There were no print, broadcast, or online advertisements for them. Someone using the iamamiwhoami name emailed a few music bloggers and sent a few tweets in order to alert people to their presence. In January 2010, the first few videos were removed and re-posted because they originally spliced in segments from other *YouTube* users without permission. Since the current set of re-posted videos began to appear in late January 2010, they have garnered over fourteen million views, over 25,000 comments, and nearly 37,000 favorite ratings. The iamamiwhoami discussion thread on *PopJustice*, a public pop culture discussion forum, is over 400 pages at the time of writing⁴. While these numbers are relatively small in relation to the larger scale of mainstream online video success, they have received a lot more attention than most videos posted to *YouTube*⁵.

The videos of the original sequence are collectively labeled *Bounty* but I divide them into three groups based on distinct functions and characteristics: the prelude videos, the bounty videos, and the volunteer videos. The six prelude videos were the first to be released and are fairly short, ranging from 00:56 to 01:22. Each of these contains imagery of a blonde woman whose identity is carefully obscured. The pairing of electronic music with images of the woman

in swamps, forests, and other natural settings is interrupted in each clip with a white line-drawing of an animal on a plain black background. Each video's title includes a series of numbers, such as "15.6.6.9.3.9.14.1.18.21.13.56155." Users have decoded the titles to read "Mandragora," "Officinarum," "Welcome Home," etc. The first few videos that were uploaded in December 2009 also contained appropriated footage from other *YouTube* videos. However, these videos were taken down and instead of appropriated footage, the replacement videos contain links to the other *YouTube* videos in the description section. The linking is a passive form of appropriation/montage in that the link signals the viewer that the content of the linked video is somehow related to the iamamiwhoami video, often in a strategy of detournement. The linked videos act almost like another sort of code, signaling the viewer interested in hermeneutics about possible interpretations intended by the artist.

The bounty grouping came after the prelude group and consists of seven videos: "b," "o," "u-1," "u-2," "n," "t," and "y." These videos are longer in duration and contain full-length songs. They continue to center on the mysterious blonde woman but also feature the introduction of other characters. The songs range in style from electronic dance music to an ethereal ballad played on the piano. These videos, with the exception of "u-1," also contain links to other videos. The songs from these videos are available for purchase on *iTunes* and *Amazon*. Many of them are also available for sale as remixed versions by various artists.

Of the nine videos in the volunteer grouping, only one, "20101104," remains on *YouTube*⁶. On October 1, 2010, the first of this grouping, the now-deleted "20101001," was uploaded. This thirty-one second video focuses on a bulletin board with slips of paper pinned to it that read, "To Whom it May Concern⁷. We need one volunteer. We trust in you to find your representative. Let us know your decision by 20101008. Present it here with a full-name, home

address and telephone number by 12am CET.” This video initiated a chain of events in which the fans on *YouTube* elected the user tehills as their volunteer. In the video “20101109,” it is revealed that tehills was unable to get a passport in time for the volunteer requirements. The video focuses on the text of an email in which tehills recommends the user ShootUptheStation⁸ as a replacement. The remainder of the videos in the volunteer group⁹ depict ShootUptheStation as he boards a plane, is taken to a hotel room, given clothing to wear, and waits to leave the room.

When “20101001” was posted, the description contained a link to the website, <http://towhomitmayconcern.cc>. The website had an embedded video¹⁰ that featured the corkboard from “20101001,” though with a different message: “To Whom it May Concern. 101116 12AM CET. IN CONCERT.” In the video, a woman’s voice speaks aloud, stating, “At 12:01 am, Swedish time, we act in concert on the wish of all. We will present you with a plausible path, available for six hours only. It is what it is.” Shortly after midnight on November 16, 2010 the site began streaming footage of what is presumably ShootUptheStation’s point-of-view, following a figure in a white hooded snow jumper through the halls of a hotel. The hooded figure leads him to a car where a driver is waiting. ShootUptheStation and the hooded figure get in the car and the driver takes off. For the first five and a half minutes, the video contains only environmental noise. At this point, the camera focuses on the back of the hooded figure as she sings part of the song from “u-1,” confirming that it is the woman from the videos. This marks the beginning of the concert, which continues when the car arrives in a remote location, around ten minutes into the broadcast. The concert continues for approximately one hour. The streaming file was taken down after only four hours (despite the promise of six hours of availability) and the *YouTube* volunteer videos related to the concert were also removed. Shortly thereafter, the

performances from the concert were offered for sale on *iTunes* and *Amazon*. This seemed to conclude the iamamiwhoami viral structure as the *YouTube* account then went inactive for six months. However, a new video entitled “;john” was posted on May 15, 2011. “;john” was followed by “clump” on July 31, 2011 and a new series, *Kin*, was inaugurated with a teaser video posted on February 1, 2012. *Kin* is described as an “audiovisual album.” Though all of the songs and videos were first released on *YouTube* and are available for free, *Kin* can also be purchased in CD+DVD and Vinyl+DVD combinations on the ToWhomItMayConcern website. Though there has been no large-scale tour, iamamiwhoami has made occasional appearances at live concerts around Europe and *Kin* has been shown at multiple film screenings. My discussion here will be restricted to the *Bounty* sequence of videos, including the prelude, bounty, and volunteer portions.

The iamamiwhoami videos circulate through media ecologies as non-standard objects. Media ecologies are dynamic systems in which disparate entities function in coordination or conflict to generate social and cultural contexts for media production and circulation. These entities might include financial institutions, industry organizations and practices, government infrastructures, social mores, technological platforms and their affordances, as well as the media objects themselves. Matthew Fuller theorizes media ecologies in *Media Ecologies: Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture* as systems in which “media elements possess ontogenic capacities as well as being constitutively embedded in particular contexts” (22-23). In other words, media elements are both productive of ecologies and produced by ecologies. In Fuller’s theory of media ecologies, culture and technologies are always multiply connected in dynamic systems and therefore always variable (4). He draws upon James J. Gibson’s systems theory to

suggest that elements in ecologies are perceived through their affordances, “not what an object is ‘of itself’ but what it might become in composition with other elements” (45).

For Fuller, “standard objects” evolve from the relationality of elements in dynamic media ecologies. Though the system is never fully stable, repeated encounters produce processes of abstraction that reduce the chaos of heterogenous existence into the appearance of “clear cut definite things with clear cut definite relations” (Fuller 102). As standard objects develop, so too do their standardized definitions and standardized uses. These definitions and uses, however, are always shaped by “things-in-arrangement” (Fuller 45). The “combinatorial arrangement of...relations” (Fuller 131) are artificially stabilized in the standard object, which results in a “perspectival optic” through which these relations and elements may be read (132). The process of standardization results in habits of usage that limit the range of uses and begin to prescribe standard objects as things-in-stabilized-arrangement. Fuller argues that these processes of abstraction are necessary, and perhaps even desirable in that they provide a common point of reference, but that standardization is “misplaced concreteness” that obscures the relational quality of elements in media ecologies (103).

For Fuller, the standard object becomes most interesting when we uncover the ways that the reductive processes of abstraction generate “overlaps, leaks, misrecognitions, alliances of bastard components” (103). That is to say standard objects become most interesting when they do not function according to the standardized uses into which they have been abstracted or when they re-arrange their connections. This process of defamiliarization can occur through the perspective of a viewer (misrecognition), through malfunction or unexpected action (overlaps, leaks), or through objects being coupled in unconventional ways (bastard alliances). Fuller cites Jacob Jakobsen’s art project *The Switch* as an example of the standard object and the potential

disruption that occurs through defamiliarization. Jakobsen installed a light switch in the circuit for a streetlamp in a small Dutch neighborhood and allowed the inhabitants to operate the switch as they saw fit (Fuller 88). As Fuller says, “nothing could be more plain and obvious than a streetlight” (89). However, the conflicting actions of neighbors over whether to turn the light on or off revealed that the straightforward streetlamp was multiply connected to practices of security and electricity usage and even one’s sense of the beauty of the nighttime landscape. Jakobsen remarks that the project “demanded a new social organization around the new variable introduced into the local environment” (qtd in Fuller 89). The addition of the switch allowed individuals to interact with street lighting on a scale rarely possible (Fuller 90) and made explicit the other ecological elements that are generally suppressed in the streetlamp as standard object. The switch shifted the perspectival optic through which the streetlamp was encountered, resulting in an effect that Fuller describes as the signal getting strange by “coming out the wrong end” (168).

The iamamiwhoami videos have several characteristics that make strange the signal of the standard media object, music video. These include an initial anonymous-release strategy. While teasers and anonymity have been used in the recent past for pre-release promotion (such as the alternate reality game surrounding the Nine Inch Nails *Year Zero* album), the sustained time period in which iamamiwhoami remained anonymous was a strategy that risked alienating fickle viewers. Much of the initial discourse regarding iamamiwhoami centered on the identity of the woman in the videos. Many others joined Gibson in speculating that the artist was Lady GaGa. Others swore it was Christina Aguilera, Goldfrapp, Fever Ray, or the band Nine Inch Nails. On *YouTube*, users produced videos “definitively” proving that their favorite candidate was the singer. Sometime around March 2010, Jonna Lee became the favored suspect and her

identity was confirmed with the June 30, 2010 release of “t,” in which her face is shown without obstruction. Even after her identity was confirmed, fans continued to speculate about the videos: who were Lee’s collaborators? Where was this all leading? and so on. The production and release strategy seems to have been a purposeful shifting of the perspectival optic such that viewers are invited not just to watch the videos for entertainment purposes, but also called upon to engage with the content through processes of research and interpretation. The conditions of production and circulation are constitutive of the viewer experience and cannot be easily separated from the videos themselves¹¹. The extended mystery of the source of the videos was the first strangeness in the signal that indicated the need for a new social arrangement. As a result, it established a dynamic of active viewer engagement that continues as users continue to mine the imagery and minutiae of the videos, convinced that there are layers of meaning in every detail.

One of the effects of this type of viewer engagement is the affective responses produced by the videos. A scan of the comments for each video reveals praise such as “this makes me ache”, “my heart beats faster when I hear iamamiwhoami,” “fucking brilliant,” and “we miss you.” In one comment on the video “n,” posted on July 14, 2011, *YouTube* user TheNomification writes,

I hate how people are simply typing in random letters and seeing things from the B.O.U.N.T.Y series. They simply say "lol this is weird" or "thumbs up if you typed_ in n and got this!!!11" If these people realized how much money and symbolism was going in to the iamamiwhoami project, they might have a different perspective on it. Google "iamamiwhoami b lyrics meaning" and click on the first result, then scroll down to the large post towards the bottom. It explains just what iamamiwhoami is about.” (*YouTube*)

TheNomification's frustration is indicative of a desire to be protective of the media object in which he and other users are heavily invested. This level of user investment is notable given the lack of traditional structures in place around the videos that are typically engineered to capture audience attention through repetition or wide dissemination.

We can further understand the level of iamamiwhoami fan engagement by looking at the types of *YouTube* activities in which the fans participate. Factors such as *YouTube* comments, ratings of “like” or “dislike,” and marking videos as favorites can help us determine how iamamiwhoami fan actions compare to those of standard media objects. For comparative purposes, the standard media object might be considered the videos of performers such as Lady GaGa and Justin Bieber, both mainstream media performers who inspire intense devotion in their fans¹². Though the iamamiwhoami videos have far fewer views than the standard media objects, there are indicators that they successfully connect with viewers despite the lack of more traditional modes of marketing hype. On average, *YouTube* users comment on the iamamiwhoami videos once per every 580 views. This is relatively close to the ratio of comments / views (414) of Lady GaGa’s videos¹³, whose fans are known as “little monsters” and who refer to her as “mother monster.” It is not as high as the ratio for Justin Bieber’s top five videos, which draw one comment per every 173 views, however. Though iamamiwhoami’s commenting ratio is lower than that of a performer like Bieber (who as of the date of writing has the most viewed and most discussed video on YouTube), it is quite remarkable that the videos encourage a rate of user response that approaches that of Lady GaGa, an international pop star with an enthusiastic global fan following. All of this *YouTube* activity is driven by circulation that is unsupported by traditional marketing and publicity strategies. iamamiwhoami videos circulate through peer networks and informal digital media such as blogs and discussion forums.

The ratings activity on the iamamiwhoami videos also suggests intense devotion from iamamiwhoami's fans. Of all the ratings for the prelude, bounty, and volunteer videos, 89.98% of them are "like" ratings. This is nearly eight percent higher than the percentage of "like" ratings for Lady GaGa (81.10%) and significantly higher than the "like" percentage for Justin Bieber (44.97%). The ratio of favorites to views also suggests parallels between fan actions on the videos of iamamiwhoami in comparison to more mainstream artists. The iamamiwhoami videos are favorited at a ratio of 1:398 views. GaGa and Bieber have a much lower ratio of favoriting activity with 1:741 and 1:1368 respectively¹⁴. The percentage of like ratings and the ratio of favorites to views on the iamamiwhoami videos suggests a high degree of investment in the videos, enough to motivate viewers to take action such as favoriting or liking at the same or more frequent rates as viewers of the videos of GaGa and Bieber, more standard media objects. Thus the success of the iamamiwhoami videos, in terms of audience connection, seems to be on par with that of more standard media objects, despite iamamiwhoami's break with the mainstream. That the collective is able to build devoted fan followings without traditional models of marketing, PR, or even public appearances, indicates that digital networks can be utilized to achieve the desirable effects of standard media object via non-standard practices.

The iamamiwhoami videos are also non-standard in that they operate as what I term a "viral structure." At the center of each viral structure is a non-standard object: an informational object, media object, or set of practices that circulate through a media ecology and generate "leaks, misrecognitions, alliances of bastard components" (Fuller 102). Like any object in a media ecology, the viral structure extends beyond the viral object. In the case of the iamamiwhoami videos, the viral objects are the videos but we cannot account for them as viral without the relational elements, including factors such as the technologies that enable

transmission and the discourses that surround the viral object. By expanding our attention beyond the viral object to include the entire structure that facilitates transmission, we are able to engage in a multi-faceted exploration of viral operations and effects. It is important to note, however, that the objects that are viral today may not be considered so in the future. In addition, an object may be only intermittently considered part of a viral structure as the media things-in-relation in the media ecology morph around it. Rather than thinking in terms of the characteristics of objects, it is more productive to approach the viral structure in terms of what it does, i.e. how it circulates. The viral structure is identified through modes of production and transmission.

In dictionaries “virus” is often defined according to its biological, digital, and social uses. Common to all three definitions are the concepts that a virus is infectious, which is generally achieved by being submicroscopic or unforeseen, circulating despite control structures, and being self-replicating. These concepts, “submicroscopic,” “unauthorized,” and “self-replicating” describe the production and transmission of the viral structure as it moves across media ecologies. The viral structure is mobilized by subjects who are “unauthorized” to produce or circulate information, or in direct challenge to powerful institutions or established practices. One way in which viral objects can be unauthorized is that they are “sub-microscopic.” In the viral structure, sub-microscopic may mean invisible or hidden, but can also refer to the way that viral structures complicate traditional notions of media hyper-visibility. The viral structure often operates without the marketing resources and scale of publicity that support more mainstream media and information objects. The viral structure can be considered “self-replicating” in the sense that the users who share the viral structure could be considered part of its reproductive system. When a viral structure self-replicates, its users are engaging in unconventional

reproduction via acts of replication, iteration, or discussion. In other words, self-replication of the viral structure can be considered one of the modes of participatory culture. Not all participatory media are viral structures, but all viral structures are participatory. In addition, the effects of the viral structure as self-replicating have the potential to feed into and reinforce its unauthorized operations.

The iamamiwhoami videos exhibit characteristics of the viral structure. The production and transmission of the videos challenge traditional broadcast structures. Ryan Dombal from the music blog *Pitchfork* says that he and other industry bloggers first became aware of iamamiwhoami when they received anonymous emails that directed them to the now-deleted first clips in December 2009. The prelude group of videos was released directly to *YouTube*¹⁵ with no indication that there were any associated products available for fans to purchase. It was only with the release of the bounty series that videos began to be accompanied by available singles on *iTunes* and *Amazon*. Seemingly content with the sale of the bounty singles, iamamiwhoami released no album or DVD of these works until June 2013. The *YouTube* pages for the videos do not initially contain links to purchase the singles. In contrast to the standard media object, iamamiwhoami's music videos are the primary media object, with the sale of singles being supplementary.

iamamiwhoami operates outside of the structures of production and broadcast that are in place to ensure the widest transmission of standard objects to ensure the highest profits. This is not to suggest that the collective do not seek publicity for the videos, nor to suggest that they do not wish to achieve wide transmission. However, the publicity strategies seem to be developed to primarily support the artistic aims of the videos rather than to support maximizing profits as a primary goal¹⁶. One might wonder which label allows iamamiwhoami to operate in this fashion.

The *iTunes* and *Amazon* pages for the bounty singles list

“<http://www.youtube.com/user/iamamiwhoami>” as the record label and copyright holder.

iamamiwhoami has bypassed the traditional record label, the institution that controls most of the standard media objects in the music industry, and instead releases music directly to their audience via *YouTube*, *iTunes*, and *Amazon*¹⁷.

Working without a label means that iamamiwhoami retains control over the artistic process. This has allowed them to release the videos according to whatever timetable they choose, which proved rather erratic. Time between release dates ranged from four to thirty-five days in the bounty series, with a time lapse of over five months between “20101104,” the last music video in the volunteer series, and “; john,” the first video after *Bounty* concluded. In addition, iamamiwhoami seems able to create videos and songs consistent with their artistic impulses. The songs of *Bounty* encompass a range of musical styles, an eclecticism that would have perhaps been constrained by the influence of a record label seeking a neatly packaged, marketable album.

In addition to challenging release strategies and the industry-standard album structure, the project continues to play with notions of artistic identity and stardom. The anonymity of the blonde figure in the first ten videos, combined with the playful username that invites speculation, indicate a tendency to push against (if not outright refuse to engage with) standard mainstream music structures centered on fame. The identity of the woman was the initial topic of most internet discussion. However, it is clear from the use of the subject “we” rather than “I” in “20101001” that iamamiwhoami is a collective. Aside from Jonna Lee, whose identity was confirmed when the video “t” showed her unobstructed face in June 2010, the only other known member of the collective is Claes Björklund. The other members remain anonymous as of this

writing. The anonymity of the makers suggests that motives other than fame and profit may be in play, which require a shift in the connection of elements in the ecology

Aside from the veiled identity of the collaborators, iamamiwhoami operates with other conditions that are contrary to the standard media strategies of hyper-visibility. With no album to promote and no label to fund a marketing campaign, it is difficult to imagine what the mainstream promotion of the videos would even look like. As mentioned previously, the only real promotion took the form of a few emails directed at music bloggers, alerting them to the presence of the videos. On February 3, 2010, James Montgomery, an MTV blogger, reached out to iamamiwhoami by writing an open letter in which he begged for more information. Given the mainstream presence of MTV, one might have guessed that iamamiwhoami would have responded with a press release or the like. Instead, Jonna Lee says that she purposefully avoided doing any interviews so as not to give the impression that *Bounty* was just a big promotional campaign (Cragg par. 16). Instead, Montgomery's begging was rewarded with two responses that avoided answers. The first was an email on February 10, 2010 alerting him to the posting of the fourth prelude video, information that he would have just as easily gleaned if he subscribed to iamamiwhoami's *YouTube* channel. iamamiwhoami's second contact with Montgomery was slightly more substantial. On March 5, 2010, nine days prior to the release of "b," Montgomery received a package via a messenger service that contained a lock of blonde hair, a few pieces of wood, and a slip of paper with a riddle involving images of the animals from the prelude videos¹⁸. The package gave no indication of the upcoming video releases, nor did it offer any further clues to the blonde woman's identity. In fact, the package seemed designed to supplement the already-existing mysteries rather than offer insight or solve anything. Using tactics counter to the strategies of profit-driven media hyper-visibility, iamamiwhoami managed to garner over

fourteen million video views despite the lack of a traditional marketing campaign, relying on a cat-and-mouse game with bloggers and the digital equivalent of word-of-mouth to spread awareness of the videos. The tactics they used fall somewhere on the spectrum between amateur viral media and professional viral marketing campaigns. Amateur viral media is often credited with a legitimacy that stems from the assumption that its capture was not premeditated, while professional viral marketing campaigns are strategically crafted to promote peer-to-peer sharing but often fail to significantly retain viewer attention. iamamiwhoami was designed to encourage peer-to-peer sharing but has done so in a way that does not seem to negatively impact the viewer's sense of the project's legitimacy.

The videos increase visibility by inviting multiple modes of participation. The encoded titles of the prelude grouping and the veiled identity of the woman in the videos make the iamamiwhoami project information-rich, inviting various hermeneutic activities. Aside from the obvious puzzle-solving having to do with the identity of Lee and the encoded video titles, the videos offer many other interpretive possibilities. Viewers on *YouTube* and the various discussion forums have busied themselves analyzing the multitude of birth imagery in the prelude videos and familiarizing themselves with folklore about mandrake root in order to understand the mandragora theme. They analyze the other videos that are linked in the descriptions. They use insights from new videos to return to older videos and revisit their analysis. Though the videos themselves are hosted in a centralized repository and thus not copied and forwarded, they are subject to a sort of stationary circulation¹⁹ in which the media object remains static while the discourse about it circulates – across *YouTube*, the blogosphere, and discussion forums such as *PopJustice*, *Oh No They Didn't!*, and *Unfiction*.

Static circulation is not the only way that the viral structure self-replicates. There are over 1,000 other videos related to iamamiwhoami on *YouTube*, including acoustic covers of the songs, remixes, and video essays “proving” the identity of the blonde woman. iamamiwhoami produces what Jennifer Steetskamp refers to as “iterability” (342). She describes iterability as “non-identical repetition in various contexts” (342). This is perhaps even a double act of replication since contact with the non-identical object is likely to also result in a user seeking out the original object. Forms of non-identical replication include parodies, remixes, mashups, covers, and the creation of other objects that signal affinity (e.g. t-shirts and calendars). Many fan communities engage in iterative production in relation to their object of fandom. In fact, some media owners invite participatory fan production in contests and other promotional events. However, these invitations often involve strictly monitored parameters and enforce intellectual property ownership in complex end user agreements. What is unique about the iamamiwhoami iterations is that the creators do not seem interested in prescribing authorized usage or in asserting their intellectual property rights. Some of the most interesting iterations of the iamamiwhoami videos are from users who have posted previously deleted content – including most of the volunteer videos as well as captured versions of November 2010’s streaming concert performance. Additional iterations include the 190,000+ images and screen grabs and 763,000 videos found during *Google* searches. The extensive documentation on the *Wikipedia* page and the multitude of blog posts each function as an iteration. Each iterative act is a non-identical reference to the original works, increasing the number of related objects across the internet. iamamiwhoami is self-replicating, even without the benefit of copies of the original videos.

The production and transmission tactics of iamamiwhoami work in contrast to standardized production strategies. The iamamiwhoami videos circulate despite a rejection of

hyper-visible marketing techniques and are instead circulated by the various participatory acts that create multiple iterations of the videos on the internet. The iamamiwhoami viral structure indicates that the networked media ecology may enable non-standard media objects to successfully challenge mainstream institutions of media power. While there is no indication that production, visibility, and iteration tactics like those of iamamiwhoami are about to topple the dominance of the recording industry, the success of the viral structure does suggest that an alternative model is possible. However, success may be defined as more than just a high number of video views. The iamamiwhoami viral structure seems to produce meaningful engagements with its non-standard media object, indicating a reversal of the loss of aura that is articulated by Walter Benjamin in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.”

Benjamin’s essay is a complex treatise on the impact of modernity on the function of art, specifically the impact of mechanical reproduction. One of the most widely discussed ideas is his argument that mechanical reproduction negatively impacts the aura of art objects. Prior to systems of mass production, art and ritual objects had a singular presence and unapproachability that imbued them with aura. Aura was connected to a sense of history and authenticity associated with a given work. Benjamin argues that once art becomes subject to mass reproduction, it starts to be designed for reproduction, which impacts presence and use value. It becomes divorced from ritual and loses its authentic and unapproachable qualities. As a result, aura is depleted. Concomitant with the depletion of aura, Benjamin argues that mechanical reproduction enables different models of audience engagement and new understandings of sensory perception. However, it is the idea of the loss of aura that generates the most discussion in relation to Benjamin’s essay. As one might imagine, recent critics have expanded the debates about aura to address systems of digital reproduction²⁰.

The high degree of affect in the language used by iamamiwhoami fans indicates this is an unusual encounter for them, that they have a unique engagement with the videos. For Benjamin uniqueness translates to aura, whether the auratic object induces veneration or horror (223). As mentioned above, the comments on the *YouTube* videos reveal racing hearts and aching souls. Text analysis of the *YouTube* comments reveals some interesting patterns that similarly point toward the aura of the videos. Some of the most frequently used words in the comments on the prelude videos are those that center on solving the puzzles therein: “christina” (825 instances), “gaga” (311), “aguilera” (306), and “mandragora” (135)²¹. For the “bounty” videos, the emphasis seems to shift. “Christina” (254) and “gaga” (624) remain among the most frequently used words, though they are joined by adjectives such as “amazing” (354), “beautiful” (234), and “art” (369). Though the word “love” is among the most frequent in the prelude comments, it becomes significantly more prominent in the bounty comments as the second most frequently used word (906 instances). As the videos progress from the prelude to the bounty groupings, the responses seem to move away from the mysteries to center more on awed reactions to the content.

A phrase net of the bounty video comments that shows word pairs most frequently connected by the word “is” reveals that the word “amazing” plays a central role in the bounty comments. Among the top thirty-five word pairs connected by “is,” “amazing” has more connections than any other word and is connected to “song,” “project,” “iam,” “music,” “art,” “iamamiwhoami,” “video,” and “gaga.” “Amazing” is additionally central to a phrase net compiled from the discussion threads on *PopJustice*. In this case, “amazing” is connected to “song,” “music,” “video,” “jonna,” and “album.” The multiple connections to the word

“amazing” suggest that viewers are in awe of multiple aspects of the project, including the songs, the videos, and the performer.

Another indicator of admiration is located in the association between the videos and art. The phrase net for word pairs connected by “and” in the bounty comments shows a strong association between the words “music” and “art.” A look at the specific uses of the word “art” reveals that user comments range from the playful (though somewhat confrontational), “THIS IS REAL ART BITCHES !” (*YouTube* user siliconetoast), to the somewhat more profound: “I love the poetic irony of the imagery. The concept is genius & the execution couldn't have been more perfect. Pay attention kids... you may not see raw emotive art like this ever again” (*YouTube* user GoodSoulDept). Though some comments disagree, most of the uses of the word “art” insist on the videos as such. A fair amount of the discussion also centers on the nature and purpose of art. The prevalence of the terms “lady” and “gaga” in the bounty video comments stems from the tendency for *YouTube* users to unfavorably compare Lady GaGa to iamamiwhoami, often labeling GaGa as too mainstream and too conventional to qualify as art, suggesting that these videos are also framed by their processes of production and circulation. The user insistence on an unfavorable comparison with GaGa indicates that not only do they find value in iamamiwhoami, but also that they find the standard media object is lacking in artistic merit.

The strong associations with art as well as iamamiwhoami’s paucity of saleable products combine to give the project a certain level of authenticity. This is not the authenticity of the unique original, mind you, but the authenticity of perceived artistic motive. *YouTube* user redcommando1 remarks on the “; john” video, “Am I right in saying she never released a full cd of her earlier work? HOW REFRESHING! not every musician is in it for the money._ She is in it for the art. [sic]” (*YouTube*). Similarly, kevvie100 comments on “o,” “I would still love

iamamiwhoami if they were a mainstream artist, however to become mainstream_ they would have to dilute their art and music, and in that case I would be disappointed [sic]" (*YouTube*). There is a sense among the users that the decision to release the videos freely on *YouTube*, followed by sales of singles and no other merchandise leads to a shift in perspectival optic that allows the videos to be read as a rejection of base capitalist concerns and the signal of an allegiance to artistic vision.

In addition to the general response that the iamamiwhoami videos should be considered art, the aura of the videos is indicated by the fan creation of products to mark their affinity with iamamiwhoami. Iambountyfan's video, "Iamamiwhoami-Calendar-2011," shows him unboxing the fan-made limited edition iamamiwhoami 2011 calendar. In addition to standard government holidays, the calendar also makes special note of the anniversary dates of iamamiwhoami video releases. The square of each release date is filled with a screen capture from the applicable video. The calendar indicates an ongoing relation to the videos and a desire to remember the sequence of events of 2010. The language used to describe the videos, the viewer's sense that the iamamiwhoami project is art, and the desire to nostalgically revisit the anniversary dates of the video releases indicate that viewers see the videos as something intrinsically valuable.

According to Benjamin, "even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (220). The unique time and space of the iamamiwhoami videos is the internet's networked space. Benjamin himself notes that authenticity is a fluid characteristic that shifts with context (243). In the context of digitally networked culture, the iamamiwhoami videos occupy the memory space of the nodes: the networked machines that host the videos and the various iterations. Additionally, iamamiwhoami occupies all of the edges along which packets of data

have traveled, even existing as an anticipatory presence that occupies the entire network in a state of potentiality²².

Though Benjamin places great importance on the status of the original art object, he notes that the history of the object includes the kind and number of copies, etcetera (243). In the case of the iamamiwhoami viral structure, the status of original vs. copy is complex. Static circulation and lossless digital reproduction mean that the usual material markers that would distinguish between authentic original and degraded copy do not exist. Thus each time the videos are viewed, the viral structure burrows a bit deeper into the fiber of the network²³. The network effect on the presence of iamamiwhoami is amplified through the other iterations of the media object – the covers, remixes, discussion forums, etcetera. Its unique presence on the network is constitutive of the iamamiwhoami viral structure. However, the configuration of nodes and edges can still shift at any moment, resulting in a presence whose uniqueness is its flexibility, its fluid transmissibility. The lack of branding, marketing, or a structured release strategy allows the iamamiwhoami viral structure to circulate without anchors to geographic locations and corporate identities, creating a nebulous “unique existence at the place where it happens to be” (Benjamin 220). In the case of the digitally networked art object, copies do not result in a degraded sense of presence. Rather, the fluid and transmissible qualities of the network enable a unique sense of presence that is part of the viral structure’s achievement of aura.

For Benjamin, the result of the unique presence of the object is a form of distance between viewer and art. He argues that distance enables aura, regardless of how close an object may be, stating, “the essentially distant object is the unapproachable one” (243). The original aura imbued by the ritual value of a religious art object comes to be displaced in the secular world by the concept of authenticity (244), which still operates on the premise of distance in

spite of closeness. For Benjamin, mechanical reproduction removes “distance.” He suggests that film offers an accelerated collapse of distance on two planes. In terms of the art object, film utilizes close up and slow motion shots to perform an extreme zoom. The camera enables a perspective unavailable to the naked eye. For the viewer, distance is collapsed in that film offers a heightened sense of participation in which everyone can be an expert. This extends modes of participation that Benjamin locates as beginning in the nineteenth century with the publication of letters to the editor.

These shifting modes of participation are one of the interventions of film into art. This is partially based upon the transition, beginning with the printing press, in which the masses had increasing access to modes of publication. Benjamin notes, “there is hardly a gainfully employed European who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or comment on his work, grievances, documentary reports or that sort of thing” (232). This puts society on the cusp of a major shift in participation, predicated on the role of the expert: “Thus, the distinction between author and public is about to lose its basic character. The difference becomes merely functional; it may vary from case to case. At any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (232). For Benjamin the contingent relationship between author and reader is detrimental to authenticity.

In the seventy-five years following the publication of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” we have seen an ongoing refiguring of the relationship between distance, participation, and authenticity. As film became ubiquitous and as it was followed by the advent of television and other broadcast technologies, the role of the standardized producer of standard media objects has become increasingly entrenched in corporate financing and complex technical apparatuses to which most people have no access. In a sense this has resulted in an

increased distance from the standard media object, as well as an accompanying alienation of the audience from the processes of production. Distance in the case of broadcast technology intervenes between the audience and the media object, inhibiting authenticity. Thus the model of aura in the age of networked transmission shifts such that the increase in closeness that results from participation actually has the opposite effect of that described by Benjamin. Rather than depleting the aura of a media object, authenticity is augmented by closeness.

The relationship between participation and aura can be linked to the importance of identity in networked media ecologies. As Manuell Castells notes in *The Rise of the Network Society*, “People increasingly organize their meaning not around what they do but on the basis of what they are” (3) and thus informational societies are characterized by the preeminence of identity as an organizing principle (22). If identity has become the organizing principle, it stands to reason that anything that supplements identity will occupy a revered place. For Benjamin, aura moved from the ritual value of the art object to the authenticity of the unique object. Now the criterion of authenticity moves from the unique object to the unique experience of the subject. Participation enables aura.

Throughout the late twentieth century we see the advent of technologies that require a new social organization that centers on a more participatory relationship with the standard media object: cable television offers a multitude of choices, videotape and video cassette recorders allow time shifting, etcetera. And of course much has been written about the ways in which digital technologies and the internet multiply the available modes of participation²⁴. The increasing democratization of technologies and spread of access mean that the media ecology in which iamamiwhoami circulates is one in which the distinction between reader / writer, figured in this context as the distinction between user / producer, is increasingly contingent, sometimes

non-existent. Benjamin's prediction that "literary license... becomes common property" is realized to varying degrees throughout the media ecology (Benjamin 232).

Lev Manovich notes in *The Language of New Media* that all interactive new media are essentially narcissistic because they allow the viewer to focus on their actions and the results of those actions (234). Narcissism indicates a harsh lack of awareness of others; however, Manovich's point is well taken that interactive media explicitly reframe textual experience as user-centric. Though the media object at the center of a viral structure, such as iamamiwhoami, may not be constitutively interactive, it still enables modes of interactivity. As such, the viral structure draws on this user-centered tendency and facilitates a particular mode of participation – that of discovery and transmission. According to Jean Burgess and Josh Green, in order for online DIY cultures to really challenge dominant media structures, it is necessary to re-value production practices and to shift participatory emphases to include the importance of practices of lurking, viewing, and sharing (82). Hence the processes of discovery and transmission take on increased importance in a networked media ecology in which users seek an experience other than the standard media object. To participate in the viral structure is also a performative act. Acts of sharing and iteration not only insert one into an active media process, they also mark one as a participant in one's social network in an act of conspicuous participation. Though the individual is of primary importance, this is still a social individual, defined in relation to a collective. In this sense, viral acts of discovery, transmission, and iteration reinforce the identity of the individual as autonomous subject and in relation to the collective, thereby situating the subject's own authenticity. Given the right context, viral structures such as the iamamiwhoami videos can be a challenge to the standard media object, the viral transmission or mutation of which imbues both the object and the subject with a returned aura of the media object.

iamamiwhoami collapses distinctions between users and producers even more than the standard interactive media object articulated by Manovich. There are other media franchises with active fan communities who analyze content or that create elaborate alternate reality games to foster fan participation. iamamiwhoami is qualitatively different in that the protracted anonymity, the methods of publicity that seem to prioritize artistic merit over profit, and the unfettered permissiveness regarding intellectual property inflect the user experience of the videos. By including a fan representative in the November 2010 live streaming concert event and by allowing the *YouTube* users to choose who would be their representative, iamamiwhoami validates the participating subject as an integral part of the viral structure. Additionally, iamamiwhoami seems to cultivate closeness with the fans by allowing the posting of previously-deleted videos and the manufacture of amateur fan items, such as t-shirts and calendars, without pursuing intellectual property rights. The lack of any aggressive pursuit of IP rights suggests that iamamiwhoami recognizes and validates the sense of ownership fans feel toward the non-standard media object. Reproductive acts, a connection between users and producers, and a validation of fan ownership all heighten the closeness of the viral structure, facilitating the aura of the media object.

Benjamin predicts that the loss of authenticity in mechanical reproduction enables the possibility of the political function of art. Though the degree to which this possibility has been realized continues to be the subject of debate, it is still worth examining the iamamiwhoami viral structure in relation to its potential for political functions. We must ask ourselves, as Benjamin did with film, whether the nature of the viral structure is transformative (227).

One of the transformations that Benjamin accredits to film is a deepening of apperception, an effect of which is that the audience is able to “calmly and adventurously go

travelling” (236). The comments on the bounty videos exhibit a high frequency of words such as “amazing,” “art,” “beautiful,” and “love,” indicating meaningful encounters. However, we have no evidence of this translating to shifts in apperception of self in relation to the world. It is here that Benjamin’s notion of distraction becomes useful. The viewers of iamamiwhoami are engaged with the media object, albeit in a mode of distracted viewing. Benjamin sets up this relationship between concentration and distraction, though he privileges neither. According to Benjamin, “the distracted person too, can form habits” (240). He argues that some problems cannot be solved via contemplation alone and thus “reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of exercise” (240). In this case, distraction is exercised through the viral structure where viewers engage in “absent-minded” examination (Benjamin 241), which leads to unconscious shifts in perspectival optics such that users expect media objects that work outside of broadcast production and facilitate meaningful reproductive acts of participation.

Because digital video shares certain characteristics with film, we may draw some parallels between them and attribute apperception to these shared characteristics. However, it is likely that any apperceptive effects of digital video are due less to the lingering triggers embedded in film than to the shift in media encounters brought about by digital and networked cultures, specifically the viral structure. In regards to film, Benjamin suggests, “the enlargement of a snap-shot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject” (236). Benjamin uses the analogy of psychoanalysis to suggest that film exposes the unconscious of our environment, making visible what was once inaccessible. The iamamiwhoami prelude, bounty, and volunteer videos share properties with surrealism and the avant-garde. What is new and productive of apperception in

this case is not the nature of the content, but rather the ways that means of production and circulation become part of the content. Thus that which is rendered newly visible occurs in relation to the viral structure.

As a viral structure occupying the network, iamamiwhoami reveals the structural formation of the networked subject. This occurs on one hand through the ways in which the videos occupy the network as its own unique presence in time and space. The fluid nature of the network is made visible through the proliferation of iamamiwhoami sites, including the 1100 *YouTube* search results. On *YouTube* alone it is possible to traverse a multitude of paths and never end up in the same location. For instance, on the page for the video “b,” the user has many options from which to choose to watch their next video. There is a link in the video description that takes the viewer to a video that iamamiwhoami signals is relevant to understanding the content of “b.” There is the link to iamamiwhoami’s channel, which can be expanded to show all available videos. Then there are multiple videos in the “suggested videos” sidebar, which *YouTube* has determined are relevant to “b.” It is possible to “get lost” while clicking around. The number of linked paths from any one iamamiwhoami video node implicitly demonstrates the flexibility of the network through a multiplicity of hyperlinked trajectories.

Another way in which the viral structure enables apperception of the network as vast and flexible is through an effect I term the viral uncanny. There is a tendency for the media objects at the center of viral structures to be multiply-discovered and transmitted. For example, it is by no means unusual for a popular video to be shared by multiple members of one’s social network, each time as though it was the original act of discovery²⁵. We see this occur in another fashion with iamamiwhoami. Comments such as those made by *YouTube* user popamon451 are written well after the initial posting of the video and ask, “whats this girls name [sic], ” indicating that

the viewer has discovered iamamiwhoami for the first time in May 2011, over one year after the initial video releases. As new viewers discover the videos, the incomprehensiveness of network communication and the serendipitous nature of traversing the network become explicit. This results in a viral uncanny effect in which media objects surface and resurface, or new viewers surface and resurface, allowing the subject to temporarily glimpse the workings of the network and her position as just one node within it. Though *YouTube* and *Google* offer advanced search capabilities, iamamiwhoami lies out on the network, waiting to be discovered over and over again.

Though the network is vast and in many ways fluid, the viral structure also reminds us that the resulting social organization is subject to control. The occurrences in which viral structures disappear or are subject to regulation reminds us that there are multiple means of enacting strategic control on the network. With iamamiwhoami, this principle is demonstrated in the removal of the volunteer videos. Data housed in a centralized archive is susceptible to control and deletion in one move. This most often occurs in relation to claims that a video violates intellectual property rights or *YouTube*'s terms and conditions. However, iamamiwhoami shows us that the stable presence of data is just as susceptible to the whim of the account owner. The ways in which viral structures surface among multiple members of a network – shared by multiple persons at multiple times, or discovered over and over again, in a sort of viral uncanny – makes visible the structural formation of the network that is vast and flexible, but also susceptible to intervention by institutions of power (legislative, corporate, etc.) or absolute whim.

At the same time that it reminds us of control structures, the viral structure reveals the possibilities of production outside of standard institutions, and thus reflects back on the standard media object, revealing its insufficiencies. In the case of the iamamiwhoami viral structure, Lady

GaGa might be considered the standard media object against which the videos are compared. Though GaGa's wardrobe choices and social activism are notable, iamamiwhoami devotees still tend to see her framed by mainstream production and circulation and therefore as qualitatively different than what they see as the amazing aesthetic project of the iamamiwhoami videos. The non-standard quality of the viral structure is only meaningful, however, when it is placed in comparison with the standard object. The viral structure underscores the insufficiencies of the standard media object and suggests that alternative engagements with media are possible.

In addition, viral structures suggest that participatory structures enable viewers and audiences to engage in tactical production. Though the viral structure reveals the possibility of control, it also reveals the possibility of the tactical exploit. Certainly we are acquainted with any number of viral fairytales from recent media history. In 2008, Justin Bieber was discovered after his mother posted his performance videos to *YouTube*. Rebecca Black became a household name seemingly overnight in 2011 when her video for the song "Friday" became a viral structure. However, these figures, who quickly became part of standardized media structures, are examples of the types of internet rise to fame that Burgess and Green critique as reinforcing existing undemocratic systems. In the case of Bieber and Black, and others like them, the network operates as an additional source from which standardized operations of production extract raw materials to turn into standardized media objects. On the contrary, iamamiwhoami has retained their non-standard modes of production, distribution and creation and continues to release videos in this way (currently 26 videos on their *YouTube* channel, twelve of which were released after the conclusion of *Bounty*). The viral structure operates in contrast to this system. The iamamiwhoami viral structure, with no formalized release strategy and no marketing blitz, largely escapes the notice of the mainstream media, providing an example of a rearrangement of

things-in-relation that includes meaningful circulation outside of the standardized definitions and uses of the standard media object. Rather than being co-opted into the strategic operations of the standard media object, those who produce and transmit iamamiwhoami operate tactically, utilizing the strengths of the network to achieve their ends, which seems to be viral promotion in the service of a project which does not place profit and fame as the primary objective.

iamamiwhoami's success, despite the lack of a recording label, counters the viral fairytale in which performers can only be validated by a move into standardized media structures.

iamamiwhoami also reveals the possibilities of tactical user participation. By posting the previously-deleted volunteer videos and providing videos of the November 2010 livestream event, users demonstrate the ways in which the centralized repository, subject to institutional and account-owner control, is also subject to exploit. Savvy users find means to download video files from centralized repositories and save them for personal reference. Early theorists of the internet celebrated its potential for promoting democracy, flattening hierarchies, and challenging institutionalized power. However, the media ecology of the internet has evolved such that a relatively small number of powerful entities control content, facilitate access, or strictly manage device usage (Google Inc., Facebook Inc., hardware makers such as Apple, and so on). Critics such as Jonathan Zittrain have noted an increasing trend in which we trade relative security and user-friendliness for less power. Others, such as Virginia Eubanks, note that digital technologies are as often a tool of domination as they are for empowerment. In the current social arrangement of the media ecology, challenges to dominant systems tend to be the exception rather than the rule. However, the iamamiwhoami viral structure reveals the ways in which the network can enable the possibility of tactical production and participation.

The iamamiwhoami viral structure makes visible the importance of the participating subject in the system of media transmission. The viral structure particularly reveals the value of the participatory acts of discovery, transmission, and iteration, thus emphasizing the structural formation of the subject as a participant in the media ecology. This system in which viral structures are propagated via discovery and transmission suggests that though the production and initial transmission of the media object are critical originary acts, a shift in social organization is required that recognizes that the acts of discovery and transmission are equally important. Additionally, acts of iteration reinforce the propagation of the media object, further reminding us of the importance of the participating subject. Iterative acts reproduce the viral structure in non-identical form and are part of the hermeneutic process of decoding and critique. Those who produce the iterations engage in a process-based form of making/doing as interpretation, a form of deformance as theorized by Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels. According to McGann and Samuels,

deformance sends both reader and work through the textual looking glass...Not the least significant consequence, as will be seen, is the dramatic exposure of subjectivity as a live and highly informative option of interpretive commentary, if not indeed one of its essential features, however neglected in neo-classical models of criticism that search imaginative works for their "objective" and general qualities. (par. 35)

The iteration is an act of critical interpretation by the creative participant, and an act that engages the subjective response to the media object. The viewers engage in acts of interpretation that also support the user-centered functions of interactive media, augmenting the authentic experience of the subject. Once created, the iterations also provide context and supplemental information for those new to the viral structure. All of these actions, from the initial production to discovery and

transmission to iterative production, play a critical role in the viral structure, enabling us to perceive the new structural formation of the networked subject as participant.

Thus the work of iamamiwhoami in the age of networked transmission is to reinsert aura into the media object and reveal the structural formation of the subject in a networked media ecology. The viral structure of iamamiwhoami engages viewers in acts of distracted viewing, forming habits through which the new structural formation of the networked subject is visible, though not necessarily consciously absorbed. iamamiwhoami reveals that though our current media ecology privileges modes other than deep contemplation, a shift in media habit is possible through challenges to mainstream institutions of broadcast and validation of multiple modes of participation. Though distracted viewing, users experience a shift in perspectival optic in which they come to expect alternate engagements with their media. Whether the distracted formation of habit will translate into the demand for non-standard media objects remains to be seen. It is through awareness of the work of the viral structure in the age of networked transmission that we may consider alternate forms of the media object that will continue to act “footage-y” (Gibson) and generate “overlaps, leaks, misrecognitions, alliances of bastard components” (Fuller 102).

End Notes

1. A tweet is a short message, 140 characters maximum, sent via the social networking platform, *Twitter*. *Twitter* is a microblogging website through which users can “follow” one another via connections that do not require permission and do not establish reciprocity (unlike other sites in which a connection via “friendship” constitutes a bi-directional relationship). There are over 550 million users and a billion tweets are sent every five days (Statistics Brain). Tweets can be spread on *Twitter* through the retweet button, which allows a user to share a message with their followers. The most retweeted message of 2012 was sent by Barack Obama after winning the 2012 U.S. Presidential election. The simple message “Four more years” was re-tweeted over 800,000 times

(“2012 Year on *Twitter*”). As of this writing, William Gibson’s *Twitter* account has 122,947 followers.

2. Link to *YouTube* content posted by “iamamiwhoami”:
<http://www.youtube.com/user/iamamiwhoami>
3. Of the twenty-three original videos, only fourteen remain available on iamamiwhoami’s *YouTube* channel as of August 30, 2012.
4. [http://www.popjustice.com/forum/threads/16648-iamamiwhoami-kin 28 Aug 2012](http://www.popjustice.com/forum/threads/16648-iamamiwhoami-kin%2028%20Aug%202012).
5. To give you an idea of the scale of iamamiwhoami’s success, consider that the video with the most views in the sequence is “y,” with 8,305,700. In contrast, the official video for Lady GaGa’s “Bad Romance” has close to 500 million views and Justin Bieber’s “Baby” has 773 million views as of August 28, 2012. iamamiwhoami has a respectable following (over 33,000 on the channel), though by no means do these numbers constitute the type of viral fairytale by which an artist discovered via online video moves into the mainstream media system.
6. The volunteer videos are all named according to the date on which the videos were posted. “20101104” was posted on November 4, 2010. All of the reposted videos in the volunteer series can be viewed on the video wall at <http://kimknight.com/iamamiwhoami>
7. “To whom it may concern” is a running theme and appears in some form in all of the bounty videos.
8. tehills’ and ShootUpTheStation’s accounts went through a period when all videos and friends were removed but both accounts appear active again. tehills’ account now has the username Quietening.
9. Titled “101112,” “101112-2,” “101113,” “101114,” “101115,” and “101115-2.”
10. The video was also available on *YouTube* but was deleted with most of the “volunteer” videos on November 16, 2010. You can view the reposted version on the video wall at <http://kimknight.com/iamamiwhoami>.
11. The variability of multiply connected elements in an ecology means that the distinction between standard and non-standard media objects is itself variable. While the nature of the collected group of *Bounty* videos constitutes an eclectic mix, the individual videos

have aesthetic similarities to those of other songs or artists, which explains why there were so many possible “suspects” for the blonde woman’s identity from the outset. Much of what makes *Bounty* non-standard is connected to the production and circulation of the videos. These factors are important relational elements that inflect the user experience and cannot be neatly separated from the videos as objects. However, it is possible that someone who is unaware of the production and circulation of the videos might not see in them anything that suggests they are non-standard. Indeed, these modes of production and circulation may become more popular and lead to a refiguring of social relations that becomes the standard.

12. GaGa provides an obvious point of comparison given that the iamamiwhoami videos were initially referred to as “the lady GaGa virus.” Admittedly, some of Lady GaGa’s practices push against the boundaries of standard media practices. Regardless, her fairly conventional music is released by a major label (Interscope Records) and backed by an extensive marketing machine. As of this writing, Lady GaGa has had ten songs on the Billboard Hot 100 chart, all top ten, including four number-one singles. Though she is an unusual and often-surprising artist, for the most part she operates via the standard media practices of our media ecology, which includes her shock-pop predecessors Madonna and Cher. Bieber, on the other hand, has never been accused of being non-standard. As of this writing, Bieber has had fourteen songs on the Hot 100 chart. The standardized production and standardized marketing practices of both artists make them both standard objects with wide mainstream appeal and extensive radio airplay.
13. All data is drawn from the five most-viewed Lady GaGa videos and five most-viewed Justin Bieber videos on *YouTube* on August 30, 2012.
14. The much higher ratio of comments / views on Justin Bieber's videos should perhaps be read in conjunction with his much lower percentage of “like” ratings. It is possible that he has more negative comments mixed in with the expressions of admiration. This is in keeping with what seems to be a popular national pastime of bashing Bieber for everything from his hairstyle to his political views.
15. It is important to acknowledge the way that *YouTube* facilitates transmission according to multiple models of production and distribution. *YouTube* is multiply connected in such a way that it simultaneously allows for corporate strategies and independent tactics. Owned by Google Inc, it is the world’s second largest search engine and is invariably a profit-driven enterprise that has come under criticism for unwavering enforcement of mainstream media owners’ copyright claims at the expense of individual fair use rights. However, the apparatuses that allow *YouTube* to partner with advertising sponsors and professional media producers, also support the distribution of independent and amateur content, resulting in a variable and dynamic space that makes explicit the many intersecting elements of a media ecology.

16. The distinction between artistic goals and profit concerns is by no means clear. As Scott McCloud asserts in *Understanding Comics* with regard to the heavily monetized models under which many comics are produced, “rare is the person in any occupation who expresses nothing and rare is the artist who cares nothing for success, i.e. survival” (168).
17. Later singles list “To Whom It May Concern” or “To Whom It May Concern/Cooperative Music” as the label. Cooperative Music is a co-op of independent labels.
18. For an image of the riddle, see <http://newsroom.mtv.com/2010/03/05/iamamiwhoami-mail/>
19. Prior to video-sharing sites like *YouTube*, people shared digital videos by emailing them, saving them on portable media, or hosting them on a website for others to download. In each case, a copy of the file is made during each act of sharing. The number of copies = the number of times a video is shared. On *YouTube* and other video-sharing sites, the file is only copied once, in the act of uploading it to the site. After that, users copy a URL that links to the one centrally stored file. In this case, the number of copies remains at one, regardless of how many times the video is shared. This makes it much easier to remove videos because once the centrally stored file is removed, the link, no matter how widely disseminated, no longer functions.
20. A small sampling of academic work that refigures Benjamin’s arguments in a digital context includes Bill Nichols’ “The Work of Culture in the Age of Cybernetic Systems”; Catherine Russell’s “New Media and Film History: Walter Benjamin and the Awakening of Cinema”; and Gumbrecht and Marrinan’s edited collection *Mapping Benjamin: The Work of Art in the Digital Age*.
21. Interactive versions of all figures in this article are available at <http://kimknight.com/iamamiwhoami>
22. The infrastructure of a network is composed of nodes and edges. The nodes are the computers on the network and edges are the pathways that connect them. Large messages traveling between nodes are split into multiple “packets” of about 1.5kb in size in order to move efficiently. The packets travel along different pathways of edges and are re-assembled once they all reach the destination node. For an introductory-level explanation of network infrastructure and packet-switched networks see “The Internet as System and Spirit” in Abelson, Ledeen, and Lewis’ *Blown to Bits* (<http://www.bitsbook.com/>).
23. My use of “the network” regrettably flattens the multiplicity of and variation among the multitude of local networks that connect to enable global transmission of texts and

information. My aim here is not to suggest equality amongst localized networks but rather to engage with the potential for connection and transmission on a global scale, despite differences in available bandwidth, government intervention, etc. Thus, my use of “the network” admittedly refers moreso to the ideological concept of the global network than to the material realities of networks.

24. For more detailed exploration of the participatory modes enabled by cable television and video recorders, see Rushkoff, *Media Virus!* and Hildebrand, *Inherent Vice*. For more on digital participation, see Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*.
25. I refer here, not to the act of seeing multiple friends share the same video in a visible chain of transmission. Rather, I refer to the occasion upon which a video is shared with one through multiple, seemingly disconnected, acts of sharing. This disconnect, embodied in lapses of time between occurrences or in the absence of a known connection between friends, suggests that the video is circulating along multiple paths on the network.

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The Paratext Is a Flat Circle: Reading *True Detective*



Katherine McLoone

“We are reading shows like novels now,” laments Rachel Syme in the *New Yorker*, “even when they don’t deserve it” (Syme, n.p.). In her retrospective review of the first season of HBO’s *True Detective* (2014-), Syme describes how “reading” *True Detective* involved “Googling about Cthulhu and eighteen-nineties horror stories.” Syme connects her heightened expectations, and subsequent disappointment, with a new method of “consuming weekly TV...with one eye on the screen and the other on the internet” which results in “intricate TV criticism” and the opportunity for “every viewer [to] feel like an expert on camera angles, acting chops, and subtext.” In Syme’s reading, *True Detective* delivered small returns on her “obsessive investment.” It did not, in other words, deserve to be read like a novel.

Syme equates “reading shows like novels” with A) an understanding of, and engagement with, technique and, B) a willingness to engage in “obsessive” “Googling.” In other words, the new method of interpreting television is one that depends on both formal criticism and new-media engagement with external information. In that formulation, Syme picks up on what new-media critics refer to as the *paratext*.

In *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, Jonathan Gray assesses the role that paratexts play in our engagement with modern television shows and film. Gray draws on the work of Gérard Genette, who coined the term *paratext* to describe the “undefined zone” that facilitates the “transaction” between text and audience (2). Genette was discussing books specifically, and so designated two constitutive parts: the *peritext* (title, preface, etc.: the material that is physically part of what we think of as a book) and the *epitext*, which includes “distanced elements” such as author interviews (5). The paratext is distinct from the *intertext*, Julia Kristeva’s term for what Roland Barthes later described as the concept that a “text is a new tissue of past citations” (39). Gray emends this definition of the paratext to include online fan communities, fan and critical responses, promotional material, spoilers, and the many other elements that go into marketing, watching, and engaging with television today. In the twenty-first century, reading the text includes reading the new-media paratext.

New media paratexts are consumed by fans, but are not always fan-created. In *Television and New Media: Must-Click TV*, Jennifer Gillan dissects the industry’s appropriation of “what were formerly considered cult activities” (3). A top-down, industry-generated paratext might, for instance, include “tweet-peat” viewing, as when Fox “ran a Twitter feed on-screen in an attempt to conduct two live Q&A sessions among” producers and consumers of its shows (24). Those industry-generated paratexts attempt to mimic fan-generated paratexts, even though, as Gray explains, fan-generated paratexts “call for subtle changes in interpretation, valuing the text’s various elements differently from industry-created paratexts, and opening up new paths of understanding” (146-7). These new paths of understanding especially emerge when “fan communities” (as designated by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse) stretch a show’s margins and become, in Henry Jenkins’ terms, “textual poachers.”

The nascent field of new-media paratext studies has performed wide to survey the broad cultural trends that define these off-screen engagements with on-screen storytelling. As a forerunner in the field, Gray calls for a new discipline of “‘off-screen studies’...that focus on paratexts’ constitutive role in creating textuality, rather than simply consigning paratexts to the also-ran category or considering their importance only in promotional and monetary concerns” (7). It is that “constitutive role in creating textuality” that led to Syme’s obsessive Googling, as well as her disappointed realization that the show did not “deserve” to be read so closely.

This essay attempts to answer Grey’s call by zooming in on paratextual engagements with *True Detective*, like Syme’s, in order to provide a narrative of how those engagements work. Although interrogations of new-media paratexts are necessarily a relatively new subdiscipline, the majority of work has taken a broad view of paratextual readings. That is appropriate, as the new digital landscape must be mapped before it can be fully explored. My goal in this paper, however, is to narrow the focus and explore paratextual readings of one show: *True Detective*. I will argue that, by examining the paratextual “readings” of *True Detective* generated by both critical and fan communities, we can see both the creation of a constitutive textuality and attempts—both failed and successful—to manage engagement with that textuality.

This essay is not, however, an attempt to provide a correct (or corrective) reading of *True Detective*, although necessarily some interpretation will be offered. Drawing on the terms used to explain paratextual readings of *Lost*, I will begin by defining three categories of interpreting television: formally, subtextually, and intertextually; those interpretations form *True Detective*’s paratext. I will then explain the narrative of engagements with those paratexts, focusing on the four stages of paratextual engagement—detection, discovery, disappointment, and reflection—

for both fans and professional critics. This case study will end with an examination of the effect of paratextual readings on narrative expectations both on the Internet and in our classrooms.

Reading Shows Like Novels: Detection

Comparisons between television and novels are not new. In his introduction to *Looking for Lost: Critical Essays on the Enigmatic Series*, editor Randy Laist explains:

It is arguably the case that no show in the history of American network television has been so invested in literary culture as *Lost*. Books appear in almost every episode of *Lost*, not only as props, but as clues... These literary riddles are satisfying not only for the particular answers they might reveal about the show's many mysteries, but also for the playful way in which they open up diverse and textured conceptual connections between the televisual and the print texts... Of course, *Lost* has become famous for the manner in which it encourages cross-over multimedia experiences with the internet, video games, and, indeed, print publishing... But whereas most of these multiplatform experiences tend to loop the consumer-audience into self-referring spirals of *Lost* arcana, *Lost*'s literary references escape the gravity of the show itself and present unique invitations to "read" *Lost* rather than simply to watch it... *Lost* is not only a television show that aspires to read like a novel, but one that tries to read like a self-consciously literary novel (n.p.).

Laist here presents three implicit models of televisual engagement. The first is an engagement with *form*: to "read" television "like a self-conscious literary novel" is to pay attention to formal elements such as cinematography, characterization, dialogue, and score. The second is an inquiry into *subtext* that plumbs the show's "mysteries" and attempts to solve the "riddles" of the show. The third method is to seek answers to those mysteries and riddles by recourse to the "diverse

and textured conceptual connections between the televisual and the print texts.” That is, to read the show’s *intertextual* engagement with extra-textual multimedia (especially literary) allusions. Taken together, publicly-circulated formal, subtextual, and intertextual readings of a show like *True Detective* constitute the paratext, and these interpretations might take the form of fan- and critic-generated assessments, responses, and theorizing about the show’s techniques, puzzles, and clues.

True Detective did not, at first blush, seem to be a show designed to produce *Lost*-like intertextual riddle-solving. Creator Nic Pizzolatto, a novelist and teacher, wrote all the episodes of the first (and so far, only) season. Each of those episodes was directed by Cary Fukunaga, best known for his work in film. Pizzolatto’s goal, quoted in a *New York Times* profile, was to “reinvent the procedural in a way that nobody has really seen” in the eight-episode first season, which would tell a complete story of a seventeen-year-long murder investigation by Louisiana State Police detectives Rust Cohle and Martin Hart, played by Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson, respectively (Manly, n.p.).

If we read *True Detective* formally, we would likely first mention the unreliability of its in-text narrators. The first five episodes have a framing device: in 2012, Cohle and Hart have been called in to consult on a series of new murders that seem eerily similar to their closed 1995 case. In 2012, Cohle and Hart, at separate times and in different rooms, narrate their work on that case as we see the events of 1995 play out onscreen. By the fifth episode, addressed in more detail below, the unreliability of the narration becomes obvious, as Cohle and Hart narrate identical stories about a “shoot-out in the woods” that was neither a shoot-out nor woodsy (“The Secret Fate of All Life”). The 1995 case, the 2012 case, and all the possibly-related cases in

between matter, but *True Detective* is, at heart, a story of two men confronting their inner darkness as they discover horrifying darkness in the world around them.

We might note the showstopper moments, such as a six-minute tracking shot in the fourth episode “Who Goes There.” That extended long take, set to the muddy beats of “Clan in da Front” by Wu-Tang Clan, mirrors Rust Cohle’s meth-fueled haze as he raids a stash house. In an interview, Fukunaga describes extended single takes as “the most first-person experience you can get in a film” (Fukunaga). More subtly, Fukunaga uses diegetic cameras in-frame cameras to emphasize the unreliability of Hart and Cohle’s narration, such as frequent shots of Hart speaking to the interrogating detective but apparently looking right into the camera. Just to the right, we sometimes see the grainy digital-camera image of the interrogation recording device. We are watching Hart being watched.

The show’s subtext is equally dense. The fifth episode, “The Secret Fate of All Life,” appears to resolve the 1995 case. This episode cuts between Cohle and Hart (in 2012) narrating a “shoot-out in the woods” in identical terms as the 1995 action onscreen contradicts their stories. That powerful sequence, however, comprises only roughly a third of the episode, which then uses a montage to draw the narrative forward to the present-day 2012 interrogations of Cohle and Hart. As the narrative structure collapses the passage of time, Cohle explains his outlook on the universe to the interrogating detectives in a series of scenes intercut with events in 1995 and beyond:

Why should I live in history, huh?...This is a world where nothing is solved. Someone once told me, “time is a flat circle.” Everything we’ve ever done or will do, we’re gonna do over and over and over again... Years: you ever heard of something called the m-brane theory, detectives?...It’s like in this universe, you know we process time linearly,

forward. But outside of our spacetime, from what would be a fourth-dimensional perspective, time wouldn't exist. And from that vantage, could we attain it, we'd see *[smashes beer can flat]* our spacetime would look flattened, like a single sculpture with matter in a superposition of every place it ever occupied, our sentience just cycling through our lives like carts on a track. See, everything outside our dimension—that's eternity. Eternity, looking down on us. Now, to us, it's a sphere. But to them *[holds up flattened beer can]* it's a circle.

In this episode, we can see the messy intersection of the subtext and the intertext. On a subtextual level, Cohle's speech clarifies his character's nihilistic perspective on redemption in 2012. That Cohle says "time is a flat circle" in 2012 raises the question of what has changed for Cohle, since the first time we encounter that phrase, earlier in the episode, it was uttered by the suspect shortly before Hart shot him. In 2012, Cohle repeats the phrase with conviction—and he is repeating a statement about the repetition of time. The theme of time, introduced in dialogue, is embellished in the structure and presentation of the passage of time.

The show also posits an external observer of the universe whose role mimics the viewer's external observation of Cohle and Hart: we watch the detectives detecting, and we begin to do the detective work of closely interpreting the show. However, on an intertextual level, Cohle's temporal musings, recalling Laist, "open[ed] up diverse and textured conceptual connections between the televisual and the print texts"—specifically, the m-brane theory (a branch of physics) and the antinatalistic wanderings of horror author Thomas Ligotti. And it is here that we can evaluate the paratextual responses to the discoveries about the show and assess the relationship of paratexts to audience expectations.

The Flat Circle of Self-Referring Spirals: Discovery

In an article published after the seventh episode (“After You’re Gone”), *New Yorker* critic Emily Nussbaum found Cohle’s philosophy shallow, nothing more than “arias of philosophy, a mash-up of Nietzsche, Lovecraft, and the nihilist horror writer Thomas Ligotti... [Cohle’s] rap is premium baloney” (“Cool Story, Bro”). Nussbaum then wonders where *True Detective* is headed:

[The show] isn’t over, of course: like any mystery, it can’t be fully judged before the finale—it might yet complete that mystical time loop Rust keeps ranting about. There are hints of the supernatural, with endless references to the “Yellow King” and the “Lost City of Carcosa”: maybe the show will reveal that it was Cthulhu all along, in the library, with the candlestick (n.p.).

Although Nussbaum has her tongue firmly in cheek in the latter half of this quote, her wonderment about the “mystical time loop” seem genuine, as though she expects the show, or its viewers, to take on the role of the external observer of all time: the “them” that Cohle says see our existence as a flattened circle. Cohle’s philosophy emphasized the unattainability of that perspective (“*if we could attain it,*” [emphasis mine]), but Nussbaum seems to expect the show to transport us, the viewers, into the role of the eternal, God’s-eye-view observer. Nussbaum also conflates two different “mysteries. One is the question of whodunit; the other is the question of what is happening: will there be a time loop? The first question is standard for all detective stories; the second type of question is unique to shows like *True Detective*, around which deeply engaged paratexts develop.

Nussbaum was not alone. Cohle’s speech inspired numerous paratextual “arias” on the possibility of time-travel, which became something of a touchstone as the show headed towards

its first-season finale, particularly on exclusively-online, fan-centric sites. *Grantland* contributor Mark Lisanti ruminated, headline-style, that “Something Tells Me We’re Not Going to Get the Time-Travel Resolution I Was Hoping For”; in the same multi-author article, John Lopez asked “Will Hart or Cohle die in the end, only to be reincarnated and live this same story over and over in an infinite regression? Yes! (Thanks to the magic of HBO GO.)” (Lynch). On *Junkee*, Matt Roden wondered:

With deep-readings of *True Detective* springing up left and right, it’s a fun rabbit hole to run down...Is this story stuck on a loop to prove a point? Was that long shot in episode four a stylistic masterpiece, or a comment on existing in a moment, shifting gears and bucking the systematic time loop that governs us all? Is it possible to discuss this show without sounding like a washed out, mentally damaged cop on his fifth can of Lone Star? [sic] (n.p.)

Rhetorical questions, which presuppose an audience’s agreement with the sentiment implied, abound in articles published prior to the season finale. Roden’s ironic query about “sounding like a washed out, mentally damaged cop on his fifth can of Lone Star,” a cheap beer Cohle consumes throughout his interrogation, reflects the distance used by most critics when grappling with the ramifications of Cohle’s philosophies in terms of what it meant for the show: to inquire too deeply into the “rabbit hole” of possibilities opened up by paratextual readings is to mimic inebriated, possibly insane wanderings. Fans and critics perform a balancing act: enjoying the discovery of the “rabbit hole” of time travel while admitting that enjoyment is likely misplaced. Those rhetorical questions serve double duty by acknowledging the watercooler conversations surrounding the show while simultaneously performing an unwillingness to fall for what fan site *TVTropes.org* calls “Epileptic Trees,” defined as a “term for wild, off-the-wall

theories. Named after a leading tinfoil-hat theory explaining the mysterious shaking, rustling trees on LOST [sic] during the first season of that program. The theory? The trees are having epileptic fits” (“Epileptic Trees” n.p.).

Lost, of course, is the show that brought the scavenger-hunt style of reading to the forefront of the new-media paratextual experience. *Lostpedia*, the fan-generated encyclopedia of *Lost* arcana, clues, episode summaries, and speculations, was founded in 2005 and has since grown to over 200,000 pages and an improbable number of registered users (Wagner, n.p.). Although *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991) may have started the trend of Internet-based madcap fan theorizing, *Lost*, airing from 2004-2010, was primed to capture the Internet’s crowd-sourced knowledge (Gray 143-74). As Laist indicates, *Lost*, more than any other show, thrived on paratexts and the discoveries they prompted.

However, after its polarizing series finale, *Lost* became a byword for unanswered mysteries and unsolvable riddles: the disappointment stage. Prior to the *True Detective* finale, *Grantland* contributor Alex Pappademas opined that “I’m still not convinced that *True Detective* isn’t actually a media virus that causes outbreaks of hysterical Doc Jensen-ism” (n.p.). He explains this new term as he postulates a conflict between the text (“the story the actual show is telling”) and the paratextual engagement (“the story the show’s fan base is telling itself”):

Jensen (first name Jeff) is the Entertainment Weekly writer who blogged voluminously and obsessively about *Lost* during that show’s run, chasing down and annotating even the smallest textual references to pop culture or philosophy, while spinning out theory after convoluted theory about Where This Was All Going...For lack of a better “jump the shark”-esque term, we can start calling this the “Doc Jensen moment” — the point in the run of a mystery-based TV show when the building leaves Elvis, so to speak, and the

story the actual show is telling gets eclipsed by the story the show's fan base is telling itself about the show [sic] (n.p.).

Doc-Jensenism, rabbit hole[s], epileptic trees, and even Laist's "self-referring spirals"—these are all terms invented by critics and fans to describe a narrative of paratextual engagement that moves from detection to discovery, to eventual disappointment. Articles like Pappademas' exhibit the fourth stage, reflection, by meditating on this process. Since *Lost*, paratextual engagement has changed from a narrative of detection-discovery (acting like Doc Jensen) to include a disappointment stage and a final element of reflection (identifying and resisting Doc-Jensenism). Maureen Ryan described the paradox of this continual allure in the *Huffington Post*: "That all these searches for truth and meaning will likely end in vain doesn't make them any less fascinating" (n.p.).

Psychoanalysis may offer an explanation for the drive behind this vain search for truth. In *Experiences in Groups*, Wilfred Bion outlines the three pitfalls of any leaderless group (called the "three basic assumptions") which compete with the psychological "work" the group must do. A *dependent group* looks to an "omnipotent and omniscient" leader for a "magic" solution: we see here the appeal of Doc-Jensenism in the person of Doc Jensen himself (Kosseff 248). A *fight/flight group* "seeks instant satisfaction...[and] security by demanding a paranoid leader" (Kosseff 249). It is possible to see a parallel here with naysayers, such as Nussbaum. The third type, a *pairing group* "occurs when two members...become the central figures in the group...as if their joining will somehow produce a Messiah, an inspiring idea, or a Utopia" (Kosseff 249). In today's large paratextual communities, it is impossible to focus on two specific members, but the notion of a hoped-for messiah or inspiring idea remains relevant.

However, “in order to maintain hope, he [or it] must remain unborn” (Rioch 25). In a later work, Bion discusses “the way in which the pressure on the analyst to give interpretations can serve to disguise an anxiety about meaninglessness” (Jacobus 108). The patient does not tolerate this meaninglessness, and attempts to “evolve a response indicating that meaning exists either in his own behavior or in that of the analyst” (Bion 81). We want the messianic idea to exist, yet we cannot permit it to exist. This psychoanalytic enigma may evoke Derrida’s explication of messianism in *Specters of Marx*, but it also explains the process of seeking an answer (detection and discovery) only to discover an anxiety of meaninglessness (disappointment), which is then covered by an attempt to find meaning in meaninglessness (reflection). We give meaning to meaninglessness by developing such terms as “epileptic trees” or “Doc-Jensenisms.”

The overtly self-reflexive nature of these paratextual engagements is appropriate to the texts they engage. As Laist indicated, *Lost*’s mysteries could quickly become “self-referring spirals”—a term that is oddly evocative of *True Detective*’s “time is a flat circle.” *True Detective* may not have engaged in a time loop, may not have shown an infinite regression of reincarnation, but it did reveal a budding narrative of how fans and critics, as a group, interacted with the paratext, and were affected by it.

The Detective’s Curse: Disappointment

The paratext of new-media-inflected television shows, therefore, contains three methods of interpretation: *formal* (technique), *subtextual* (theme), and *intertextual* (allusion). The process of interpreting is the *paratextual engagement*: a narrative in itself of how the collective group of fans and critics seek meaning (detection and discovery), find meaninglessness (disappointment),

and reflect on that meaninglessness (reflection). As the above examples showed, a key component of paratextual engagement with *True Detective* was inspired by the subtext of the nature of time, which was transmuted in various paratexts to the subtext of time-travel.

However, theories of time-travel, or collapsed time, were not the only occasion for paratextual engagement with *True Detective*'s first season. Perhaps the most interesting, and intense, example of "Doc-Jensenism" occurred after one article introduced the possibility of the supernatural, which was quickly picked up by numerous critics and fans, yet which never bore fruit.

In "The One Literary Reference You Must Know to Appreciate *True Detective*" on fansite *I09*, author Michael M. Hughes identified Robert W. Chamber's 1895 story collection *The King in Yellow* as "key to understanding the dark mystery at the heart of this series." As Hughes describes it, "*The King in Yellow* is a fictional play within a collection of short stories—a metafictional dramatic work that brings despair, depravity, and insanity to anyone who reads it or sees it performed," which is associated with the pseudo-mythical location of Carcosa.

Hughes' article is an example of why we can no longer speak of "fan communities" separately from those created by the television industry or those created by "normative" readings, as Gray does (146-7). Hughes is an author; his first novel was published in 2013. But his novel was not a best-seller, and the "Writing, News, and More" page on Hughes' website lists his *I09* article—and the many other articles that cite it—above news about that novel. Hughes, in other words, is both fan and professional writer. In 2010, Gray explained the now-out-of-date dichotomy: "We must avoid the trap of seeing these [fan-generated paratextual readings] as necessarily of equal presence and power as those created by film and television producers and their marketing teams" (162). Now, however, the lines are blurrier, as fan-

generated readings inspire traditional critics (those paid for their work, often at prestige or legacy publications), and producers interact with traditional critics and fans in an attempt to manage the paratextual apparatus their shows have engendered.

And Hughes' influence was vast, even though he anticipates criticism of his theory:

But where, one might wonder, is this all going? Is this just writer Nic Pizzolatto dropping nods to his favorite authors and their fans? Some critics have dismissed the idea that the show is moving into the realm of the supernatural, but I have little doubt that it is going to only get much weirder and much, much darker. The clues are all there for those with eyes to see...Cohle has seen the monster. I suspect we will, too.

Of the 503 comments on Hughes' article, I rated 449 as positive (including support for his theory, links to related media, developments/additions to his theory, or minor corrections to his theory). Six comments were negative or dismissive of his theory; eight expressed reservations appropriate to the reflective stage of paratextual engagement. 40 were irrelevant (for instance, an off-shoot discussion of one commenter's recent dental surgery). Hughes' theory was based on evidence from the show, and his reading was quickly repeated and developed in paratextual communities. Those paratextual communities included traditional critics, as we have seen. Nussbaum is drawing on Hughes' article in her *New Yorker* article quoted above: "There are hints of the supernatural, with endless references to the 'Yellow King' and the 'Lost City of Carcosa': maybe the show will reveal that it was Cthulhu all along, in the library, with the candlestick."

Carcosa and the King in Yellow were popular snipe-hunts, and not only in the acclaimed pages of the *New Yorker*. *The Atlantic* wondered: "Who or what is the Yellow King?," although the author clarified he did not expect the Yellow King to be "supernatural" (Orr n.p.). *Grantland*

culled a variety of theories from various sources, including a Reddit thread that suggested the Yellow King was not a person, but a boat (Lynch n.p.). That may be the oddest Reddit theory, but not by much. More than half a million people have viewed a parodic YouTube video that inserts a man, dressed in yellow, wearing a crown, into numerous scenes from the show (“True Detective: Yellow King Theory.”) The comment section of an *A.V. Club* article that embedded that video included this discussion (I have omitted usernames to maintain privacy):

First User: I’ve heard a lot of people (who weren’t joking like this guy) talk as though we’re going to find out that this-or-that character is the yellow king. The yellow king is presumably a mythical figure who the cult makes sacrifices to, right? I wouldn’t expect the yellow king to be an actual character. Unless, of course, it’s the guy dressed in yellow who looks like a king.

Second User: There won’t be a Yellow King, or a real place called Carcosa, or anything like that. I don’t think so anyway—it’s just all part of the ritual.

Third User: Next you’re going to tell me there’s no Santa Claus and the North Pole doesn’t exist.

Second User: Geographic or Magnetic? (Adams n.p.).

This conversation replicates, in miniature, the narrative of detection (Yellow King), discovery (his place in the mystery of *True Detective*; theories about a “ritual” that was never seen on the show), and self-awareness of potential disappointed meaningfulness (Santa Claus), including the odd extension of that meaningfulness to the real world: the North Pole, of course, does exist, as Second User implies in his response to Fourth User.

Writ large or small, the narrative of fan expectation took fire in the lead-up to the season finale. *The Daily Beast* summarized the phenomenon in an article written after the penultimate episode:

So far a lot of the geekier discussions about *True Detective* have revolved around the show's more "supernatural" elements. Robert Chambers' 1895 horror classic *The King in Yellow*. The word "Carcosa," which Chambers borrowed from Ambrose Bierce, and which later showed up in the works of H.P. Lovecraft. The spiral symbol on Dora Lange's back. The flock of birds that formed into the same spiral in an early episode. Cohle's synesthesia. Reddit boards are full of readings that would impress Talmudic scholars, or perhaps CIA cryptographers, with their ontological complexity: what this represents, what that means, and how it's all leading up to some sort of otherworldly finale (Romano n.p.).

But then author Andrew Romano took a slightly different approach: "I don't buy it. Why? Because that's not what Pizzolatto is up to—according to Pizzolatto himself." *Grantland's* Mark Lisanti put it another way, repeating the motif of Lone Star beer symbolizing a descent into theoretical madness: "Whom are you going to believe? The guy who actually wrote the show, or the incredibly intricate system of colored yarn connecting the hand-drawn portraits of every suspect you've plastered to the wall with an improvised paste made out of stale Lone Star and your own blood?" (Lynch). Those engaged in producing and responding to paratexts began to call for an authorial, and authoritative, reading to manage the disappointment stage of engagement.

As explained above, Jonathan Gray outlines how fan-generated paratexts "call for subtle changes in interpretation, valuing the text's various elements differently from industry-created

paratexts, and opening up new paths of understanding” (146-7). Those fan-generated paratexts, however, can come into conflict with what Jennifer Gillan identified as industry-generated paratexts. Those industry-generated paratexts include the *epitext*: those distanced elements, including author interviews, which Genette described. In the examples listed above, however, we see a plea for an industry-generated paratext: an answer to the theorizing, a messianic debunking. Recalling Wilfred Bion’s three basic assumptions, the dependent group—the fan and critical community—now looks for a leader sanctioned by the industry that has attempted to co-opt fan engagements.

Creator Nic Pizzolatto was happy to answer that call. Pizzolatto did plenty of press during the run of *True Detective*, and he was clearly tapped in to the conversations surrounding the show. In an interview with *Buzzfeed* published after the third episode (“The Locked Room”), Pizzolatto defended Cohle’s monologues against criticism: “If you pay attention to Cohle’s philosophies they’re actually much deeper and more nuanced and grounded in legitimate scientific and philosophical thought than some asshole getting stoned and talking about the meaning of life” (Pizzolatto, qtd, in Romano).

But after the seventh episode—which is also after Michael Hughes’ article about *The King in Yellow* and *Carcosa*—Pizzolatto attempted to manage fan and critical paratextual engagements while maintaining a veneer of innocence as to their content:

I don’t read internet chatter, but all I can offer is that to date there hasn’t been a single thing in our show that’s supernatural, so why would that suddenly manifest in the last episode? The show has a quality of mysticism, for sure, but nothing supernatural so far. I think there’s a lot of self-projection going on in certain cases; like the show has become a Rorschach test for a specific contingent of the audience in which they read their own

obsessions into it. This is what it means to resonate with people, so I don't mind it. The danger is that it's myopic and unfairly reductive, like a literary theorist who only sees Marxism or Freudianism rather than the totality of a work (Pizzolatto, qtd. in Aurthur).

Pizzolatto walks a fine line here: the "internet chatter" (of which he is unaware) is incorrect—but there's nothing wrong with those errors, so long as they are not reductive. He expands on that view in an interview, published before the seventh episode, with none other than *Entertainment Weekly*'s Jeff Jensen, whose "Doc Jensen" moniker we discussed earlier:

Jensen: You've cultivated so much palpable dread that some are convinced that supernatural forces are at work.

Pizzolatto: Like Cthulhu is going to rise up and take control of the world of *True Detective*?

Jensen: Ummm... is it?

Pizzolatto: I hope the audience will be pleasantly surprised by the naturalism of the entire story... It has occult portents, but there is nothing supernatural about it.

Jensen: Many of us have been puzzling over the significance of *The King In Yellow*... What's the significance to you?

Pizzolatto: You know... *The King In Yellow* is in there because it's a story about a story, one that drives people to madness. Everything in *True Detective* is composed of questionable narratives, inner and outer, from Cohle's view that identity is just a story we tell ourselves, to the stories about manhood that Hart tells about himself, to the not always truthful story they tell the detectives investigating them. So it made sense – to me, at least — to allude to an external narrative that that is supposed to create insanity, or as I prefer, deranged enlightenment (n.p.).

Fittingly, Pizzolatto's top-down attempt to manage fan expectation—to clarify his use of subtle allusion rather than “clues,” and to defeat the risks of incipient Doc-Jensenism and resultant disappointment—has precedent within *True Detective*. Hart and Cohle both address the need to find meaning in disparate clues. They are, after all, detectives. Both characters emphasize the need to create a “narrative” out of a case. Cohle explains that “everyone wants confession, everybody wants some cathartic narrative for it, the guilty especially” (“The Secret Fate of All Life”). Hart has a different perspective, explaining the perils of crafting an erroneous narrative as a “detective’s curse”: “Solution to my whole life was right under my nose. That woman, those kids, and I was watching everything else...My true failure was inattention. I understand that now” (“The Secret Fate of All Life”).

A “failure” of “inattention” seems diametrically opposed to Rachel Syme’s “obsessive Googling.” But the root of both is the same: attention to the wrong thing, or faulty detection. Syme was not alone in expressing disappointment over the finale, which was watched by 3.5 million viewers on its first airing, a series high (Kondoloy). Users attempting to stream the finale crashed HBOGo, HBO’s online streaming site (Chai). Some viewers reacted positively: *The AV Club* gave it a grade of A- (Adams, “*True Detective*”). Others, such as Isaac Chotiner of the *New Republic*, exhibited the reflective stage: he explained that “*True Detective* came to an end tonight with a superb episode. It may disappoint people who were hoping for earth-shattering revelations.” But Emily Nussbaum’s *New Yorker* headline ran “The Disappointing Finale of *True Detective*.” Willa Paskin, of *Slate*, boiled her complex reaction down to a simple formulation: “I did not like that” (Haglund). *The Atlantic* asked, in the headline: “That’s It?” (Kornhaber).

Alan Sepinwall of *HitFix* explained why he was not underwhelmed: he ignored the paratext, unlike many of the viewers and critics who watched the finale:

The plot was never the most compelling part of the series...I never felt all that invested in the identity of the Yellow King ...I had no pet theories about the case; I cared much more that the story of Rust and Marty come [sic] to a satisfying conclusion than that the case they were investigating did. So the fact that this sprawling, complex investigation all boiled down to [a simple who-done-it] didn't really wreck things for me (n.p.).

Sepinwall's review of the finale sums up the tension between paratextual engagements with television shows and the creation of expectations that seem destined to be unmet: too much engagement, too much devotion to the "pet theories," can lead to a show being "wrecked" by those very passionate engagements that were so thrilling to so many viewers. When Hart speaks of his "failure" as "inattention," he does not mean inattention to the small details, the clues and riddles that comprise a murder-mystery or a TV show. He means the big details—the people in his life, the characters in the show—that can be overshadowed by the subtler, and therefore more initially thought-provoking, mysteries. Hart, like some viewers, missed the forest for the trees.

A Good Box Man: Reflection

In "The Locked Room," Hart asks the interrogating detectives which of them is the "box man": the one who takes the lead during the interrogation of a suspect. In the Hart/Cohle partnership, Cohle is the box man. He finds the "cathartic narrative" and is the expert reader of people who knows within ten minutes if someone is guilty or innocent ("The Locked Room"). His failures are never failures of inattention. Cohle resists the narrative of disappointment, existing in a perpetual state of self-reflection.

It is distinctly possible that the narrative of paratextual engagement outlined here is nothing more than a flash in the early twenty-first century pan, and it is undeniable that only select shows provoke this level of paratextual engagement. The disappointment provoked by attention to the “pet theories” and inattention to the character arcs that vexed many “textual poachers” in the wake of *Lost* and *True Detective* may cause an eventual decrease in fan willingness to Google their way to a show’s ostensible answer. But it is not insignificant that theorizing about *Lost*, despite being popular among unpaid fans during its run, was restricted to just a few professional critics, such as Jeff Jensen of *Entertainment Weekly*. Yet ten years after *Lost*’s premiere, established magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* offered similar levels of clue-hunting for *True Detective*, and occasionally drew on fan-generated paratexts to do so.

Regardless of its possible longevity, in-depth paratextual engagement with subtext and intertext is a new interpretive method, crowd-sourced rather than dictated from on high, which operates at the intersection of new media and television. Although my inner pedant—and possibly yours—might want to let loose with a cry of “You’re doing it wrong!” prescriptivism is simply not possible or productive in a new-media environment. What is possible? A descriptivist assessment of how paratextual engagement operates, which I have attempted to offer here, and a consideration of how that engagement might impact any text, televisual or otherwise, that we teach in more traditional manners in our classrooms.

In “Filling the Box: Television in Higher Education,” Derek Kompare puts Television Studies in the context of the crisis of the humanities: “While the fundamental question ‘What is television?’ is of course critical in how we conceive of our scholarship, it is equally critical to consider how we teach this question. In other words, what does an ‘education in television’ mean

in the twenty-first-century context of potentially radical shifts in the expectations and functions of both television and higher education?” (162). Kompare contrasts the disciplinary and institutional changes Television Studies has undergone with the apparent paradox that television’s one stability is its very changeability. That changeability affects not just our research into television, but our experience of teaching it—and by extension, teaching the humanities:

The rationales that shape our broader concepts of television in the university and in the curriculum should also help situate its coverage and treatment in our courses. This includes better explaining to our students (and most important, acknowledging to ourselves, as we prepare the same courses over and over) that television is, and always has been, multiple: a box of possibilities described and filled by competing, contingent interests. In fact, our students’ experiences of TV are already rife with these definitions. In many ways, television is not the same medium it was ten, twenty, or fifty years ago. Most of our students came of age with the Internet; many of them certainly take for granted industrial and cultural practices—like file sharing via BitTorrent, licensed online streaming of TV content, and YouTube—that were “experimental” only a few years ago. Yet television is also stubbornly continuous. It largely maintains a cultural centrality it acquired a half century ago, and most of its major program forms have been around for that long as well. In addition, it remains, as it was then, a site of controversy, and of potential excess, critique, and art. These are all key aspects of the humanities and absolutely relevant terrain to be explored in a university education (165).

In this essay, I have attempted to articulate the newest dynamic in the always-changing field of television studies: the rise of the paratextual engagement and the narrative pattern that engagement follows. That new method of viewing, with one eye on the show and another on the

Internet, directly impacts our students, who are being taught by television shows, and by their interactions with those shows, this new method of interpretation. An “education in television” happens in our classrooms and on our syllabi, but the education *of* and *by* television happens when our students mine a show’s *-pedia* for links to paratextual material, follow a columnist’s weekly recaps, or participate in an online discussion about possible interpretations of the latest mystery.

As students are taught new methods of engaging with texts, and told that these new methods fall under the mysterious rubric of “reading shows like novels,” we must in turn teach them the metacognitive skill of interrogating the perils—and pleasures—of those new methods of engagements. Doing so does not just help us understand the new answers to the question “What is television?” Doing so also helps us understand how to answer the bigger institutional question: how does studying both television *and its reception* benefit students and therefore the goals of a humanistic education? An understanding of this new paratextual reading, whether it results in deep understanding of a show or the frustration of a snipe hunt, demands a similarly new pedagogy, as we move from what Kompare calls the “stubbornly continuous” nature of television to a more vibrant, and more engaged, model of television, both in and out of the classroom, as a participatory experience.

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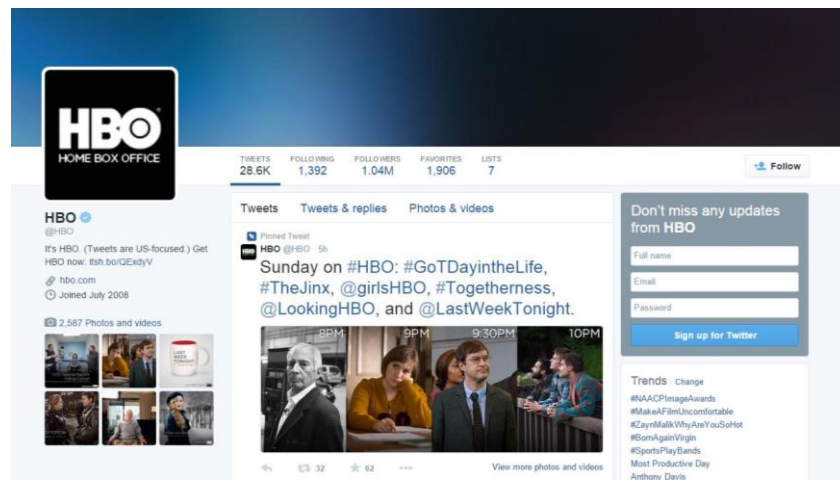
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It's Not TV, It's Twitter: HBO's Branding Practices and Tweeting Quality and Distinction



Cory Barker

On Sunday, April 20, 2014, HBO retweeted (or reposted) a quick reminder about the latest episode of *Game of Thrones* (2011-) from the program's Twitter account:

@GameofThrones: "QUIET IN THE REALM. #BreakerofChains starts now on @HBO.

Silence your ravens and spread the word. #gameofthrones."

HBO's retweet unsurprisingly came at 9:00 p.m. EST, moments before a new episode began.

The retweet directed users *what* to do (pay attention to their televisions and remind friends and/or fellow fans) and *when* to do it (right at that moment).¹ It also came with two hashtags (words prefixed with the pound sign, i.e. "#gameofthrones") intended to help the series trend, or appear on Twitter's real-time list of popular topics. Unsurprisingly, given the popularity of *Game of Thrones*, the promotional tweet scored over 2,000 retweets and 2,000 favorites in a few hours.

This type of content is what one might expect to see from a television network account on Twitter: brief, focused on driving users to the television screen (or any number of screens), and

with some semblance of interactivity.² Although HBO's Twitter activity broadly fits these criteria, other tweets on April 20, 2014 demonstrated the more diverse range of tweeting being done by or on behalf of the network. Alongside the *Thrones* prompt were tweets or retweets that (1) encouraged users to watch new episodes of other series such as *Veep* (2012-) and *Silicon Valley* (2014-); (2) asked users to submit questions to a live Q&A with *Silicon Valley* actor T.J. Miller; (3) promoted links to trailers of upcoming HBO projects like *The Normal Heart* (Ryan Murphy, 2014); (4) highlighted the pithy live commentary or behind-the-scenes information from various actors; (5) celebrated the quality of HBO programming through user commentary; and (6) provided targeted ads from corporations like Intuit. Within a short period of time, the HBO Twitter account disseminated conventional promotional updates, behind-the-scenes content, news updates, running observations from industry professionals and fans, and familiar advertisements. This wide array of activity is more of the norm for many networks on Twitter.

There are conflicting reports about just how often we use second screen devices (smartphones, tablets, and laptops) while we watch (Block), or how much correlation there can be made between tweeting and watching (Nielsen; Spangler, "ABC"). Nevertheless, the industry has decided that Twitter matters; networks partner with the platform to understand consumer habits (Spangler, "TV Viewers"), while Nielsen and Twitter now tabulate real-time viewing data (Sladden). Although the industry is still grappling with these practices, I would like to turn the attention to how networks' Twitter activity fits within the broader process of branding. Generally defined, branding is "a distinguishing name and/or symbol...intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those competitors" (Aaker 7). In the television industry, branding's role expanded in the 1980s amid increasing media consolidation, an explosion of new cable networks, and the

segmentation of audiences. Branding has only grown more crucial as consumers have turned away from traditional modes of live viewership and toward other options like DVRs, Netflix, BitTorrent, and more. Scholarship on branding concentrates on how promotional “paratexts” (Genette; Gray) such as commercials, one sheet posters, logos, on-screen chyrons, individual programs, and industry discourses (critical acclaim, trade press chatter, and awards) shape network brands. But where does social media, specifically Twitter, fit into this framework? How does Twitter activity sync with the brand identity networks have established elsewhere? If it does not, what are the incongruous moments between a network’s brand and its Twitter activity? Are networks simply using Twitter as a depository for other promotional material?

To attempt to answer these questions, this essay offers examples of Twitter activity from one notable network, HBO. The result of my exploration of HBO Twitter activity is two-fold. First, I present a brief and introductory taxonomy that describes five primary “types” of network tweeting: (1) traditional promotion; (2) behind-the-scenes access; (3) congratulatory retweeting; (4) corporate synergy; and (5) fannish engagement or embodiment. Second, I offer a close reading of HBO’s Twitter practices and how they fit within the network’s established brand. I argue that HBO uses Twitter to underscore the “prestige” and “quality” of its original programming and its ability to attract major stars and creative auteur figures. Meanwhile, it ignores the majority of its film library and reruns and limits the promotional and legitimation of user feedback. This approach to Twitter is consistent with how the network constructs its brand in other media; however, it also illustrates the content and practices that are purposefully absent in the branding process.

Although there are a number of networks using Twitter to create fascinating promotional campaigns or to engage with audiences, I chose HBO for a few reasons. First, HBO has an

extremely identifiable brand among viewers, critics, and scholars. This makes comparisons between “traditional” branding materials and tweets easier to construct. Second, HBO’s activity on Twitter displays how even an reputable brand requires constant maneuvering between distinct practices, from building hype to reinforcing synergistic partnerships to managing customer service issues. Ultimately, identifying the strategies utilized by HBO develops a better understanding of the logics of the media industries and how they attempt to “discipline” (Caldwell 274) social media platforms and users alike.

To investigate HBO’s Twitter activity, I narrowed my window to March and April 2014, a period that resulted in hundreds of tweets from the network. Relying on close analysis of tweets raises a few methodological issues, particularly in terms of when and what to highlight for examination. As Bruns and Burgess argue, a researcher would likely face months of work, just in collecting and coding, to obtain the clearest picture of Twitter activity (5-6). Thus, tweets from a two-month period are then just a part of a much larger picture. Nevertheless, I assert that the tweets provided here are representative of HBO’s practices on Twitter. I chose these months for both access and immediacy. Of course, it is easier to access more recent tweets without having to dig deeper into an archive; this is especially true with Twitter’s spring 2014 interface update that increased the screen size of individual tweets and produced slower load times. Selecting recent tweets also allows for a survey of how HBO uses Twitter during a time when it has some of its more notable projects on the air or on the way—*Game of Thrones*, *Veep*, or *The Normal Heart*—and thus has a clear incentive to tweet regularly.

Similarly, it also key to recognize that the producer of HBO’s tweets is unknown; it could be a series of interns, a mid-level executive, or outsourced to a boutique agency. While this essay assumes a certain sense of coherency to the tweets, I acknowledge that this might not always be

the case, nor can we ever know without conducting interviews with the professionals creating this content. However, interviews with industry professionals present their own complications. As Johnson argues, “branding becomes, then, a frame through which industry discourse about its own working practices and values is articulated” (*Branding Television* 20-21). Meaning, comments from those within the industry, however obtained, are often provided with the brand image in mind; executives are always looking to spin or promote, even when speaking to academics. Therefore, focusing specifically on tweets illustrates the final product of brand messaging, the content that networks want users and viewers to see.

Television Network Branding

Though media brands have received increased attention in recent years, Grainge notes that branding is hardly a new development in the industry (*Brand Hollywood* 8). Film studios turned to visual trademarks, one of the most recognizable branding tactics, and promoted films on the back of stars as far back as the early 1900s (Desser and Jowett xii-xv). Staiger argues that the industry regularly sought to adapt modern selling techniques to attract consumers (10-15); as such, the increasing prominence of branding in the culture at-large beginning in the 1980s was not lost on the studios. In television, nascent cable networks first adopted branding in the 1980s to try to stand out amid an increasingly competitive marketplace. As viewers’ choices further increased by the late 1990s, the broadcast networks were also forced to turn to more specific branding procedures. Today, all networks use brands and targeted programming more than ever before to appeal to niche demographics and lifestyles. Branding is often thought of as something of a synonym for advertising, but it plays a much larger role in the contemporary media environment. As Gray suggests, branding “require[s] much more than just ads” (29). Networks

spend millions of dollars to produce a multitude of promotional material, craft new slogans and logos, and develop programs and “ancillary products” (qtd. in Johnson, *Branding Television* 18) that fit some kind of internal “brand filter” (Roberts). Social media provide additional platforms for networks to extend their brands in new or different ways, and as such, brands are multi or transmedia entities, not something that exists “solely on television” (Ward 55).³

Consequently, strands of recent scholarship highlight historically and industrially contextualized readings of the range of promotional material (Fanthome; Grainge, *Lost*; Selznick), as well as the programs and ancillary products that influence a network’s brand identity (Jaramillo, “Family Racket”; Johnson, “Tele-Branding”; Jaramillo, “Stumbling Toward a Canon”; Johnson, *Branding Television*; Smith). This research explores how networks attempt to create a coherent, marketable identity and “address different kinds of audiences at once” (Grainge, *Brand Hollywood* 10). Nevertheless, despite networks’ desire to craft the perfect brand campaign across multiple media platforms, I would argue that brands are not just established by a combination of promotional practices, programming, and ancillary products. Instead, they are discursive creations, just as influenced by “official” industry products and practices as they are by quotes in the trade presses, gossip, critical and fan reception, awards-granting bodies, and more. These discourses can supplement or subvert official network brand practices and depending on the context, social media platforms like Twitter allow networks to appropriate these discourses for their benefit through pointed retweeting, linking, and sharing.

It is also worth noting what network brands are intended to achieve. Selznick posits that branding is intended to “attract target audiences and ultimately create brand equity... a brand must be known to users and must be considered favorably” (181). For the industry, the hope is that equity transforms into loyalty and that a “relationship between viewers and the

network...extends beyond the acting of watching television” (Johnson, *Branding Television* 50) toward “brand extensions and ancillary products” (Grainge, *Brand Hollywood* 56). This form of relationship branding, also referred to by Jenkins as “affective economics,” (61-64) is a popular tactic online and on social media because the presumed “interactivity of the web... offers the possibility of two-way communication and social networking” (Johnson, *Branding Television* 49) that convinces users that they are participating in the brand experience. As I will describe momentarily, HBO is very proficient at employing affective economics in its Twitter activity, even as the network only occasionally engages with users and/or valorizes their feedback.

Toward a Taxonomy of Network Twitter Activity

Before detailing how HBO’s Twitter activity fits within its established brand, it is useful to describe the different types of tweeting that the network (and most others) engages in on a regular basis. This introductory taxonomy includes five categories: traditional promotion (reminders about about-to-begin episodes, notes about upcoming content); behind-the-scenes access (set photos and videos, tweets and retweets of commentary from cast and crew); celebratory retweeting (reposting of praise by anyone from ‘normal’ users to celebrity fans); corporate synergy (updates from advertisers and/or other networks and media companies in the conglomerate family); and fannish engagement or embodiment (direct conversation with fans and mirroring stereotypical fan tone and style [i.e. more capitalization, exclamation marks, and OMGs]). This taxonomy recognizes that *all* network Twitter activity should be viewed as some form of promotion. I also acknowledge that there are issues with any taxonomy; the above categories can and do blend together in the space of 140 characters and there are likely other categories not present here. Nevertheless, my intention is to produce an initial framework for

understanding tweets within the brand context. As such, I provide examples of these categories through my discussion of HBO, but concentrate more on how the categories aid in the construction of the network's brand.

Establishing the HBO Brand

As one of, if not *the*, most celebrated network on cable, there has been a substantial amount of dialogue about HBO's brand identity. In fact, when it comes to scholarly analysis of network branding, HBO has far and away received the most attention. Scholars have demonstrated how the network's successful brand identity stemmed from an important industrial challenge. HBO's position as a pay cable network dependent not on advertising revenue but monthly subscriptions means that it must promise something different to consumers to convince them to pay the \$10-15 a month for programming. As Anderson notes, "In order to ensure HBO's continuing *economic* value for subscribers, the network must establish a unique *cultural* value among television networks" (30, emphasis in original). Over the last 20 years, the cultural value promised by HBO is couched in a perceived "quality" and "exclusivity" of the network's programming, but also in the perceived quality and exclusivity of the subscribers. Santo claims that that HBO "sells cultural capital to its subscribers, who are elevated above the riffraff that merely consume television" (20). This sense of cultural capital is embedded in HBO's promotional practices—none more so than the "It's Not TV. It's HBO." slogan.

Nonetheless, it took HBO some time to build that now-famous slogan. While the network's initially established itself as a "luxury brand in a populist medium" (Anderson 30) with feature films and live sports coverage, its investment in original series production in the mid-1990s had the biggest impact on the development of the brand. HBO is regularly credited

with kicking off the most recent “golden age” of television with drama series like *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002-2008), *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005), and *Deadwood* (2004-2006) (Sepinwall). The impact of HBO’s original series took “the threads of what have been different about HBO’s previously original programs—sexuality, graphic violence, profanity—and put them in a context where they all work together to become a unique and distinctive product” (Rogers et al. 53). Pointing to the influence of programs on network brands, Johnson argues that while HBO’s earlier brand identity was established through traditional promotional practices, it was later driven by the “aura of quality” (*Branding Television* 30) surrounding its series. This increase in original series brought HBO an embarrassment of riches in awards, ratings, and critical acclaim. As Johnson asserts, “The tying of HBO’s original programming to its brand identity was reinforced through the coverage that HBO received in the press over the late 1990s and early 2000s” (*Branding Television* 31-32). The network’s reputation within the industry greatly improved as well, permitting HBO to position itself as a place where creative auteurs could be empowered to follow their muse.

Over time, HBO’s vows of quality grew to stand in direct contrast to the broadcast networks—that HBO made better programming, that it gave writers and directors more freedom, that its promotion was nowhere near as shameless, and that it helped television become art. As Lotz notes, HBO’s infamous “It’s Not TV” slogan signaled its distancing from “stereotypic notions of television as a ‘low art’ form” (50). Similarly, Jaramillo comments that with the slogan, “The implication is that TV is everything else” (“Family Racket” 65). This branding strategy worked masterfully for HBO. The network advanced a “deeper and more durable *relationship* between subscribers and the brand”, to create “loyalty among viewers by insinuating the network into their weekly viewing habits” (Anderson 30, emphasis in original). Segments of

the viewing public that see themselves with good taste have been especially loyal to the network. HBO's brand, Polan asserts, engages in the "performance of distinction" that plays to "an intellectually savvy and culturally informed spectator" (280).

Auteurs and @Replies

With this brand history in mind, I turn my attention to HBO's Twitter activity and the ways in which the network works to construct ideas of quality, exclusivity, and distinction on a platform that encourages real-time activity and engagement among users. As a network that seems to truly understand branding, HBO's Twitter activity consistently mirrors the promotional discourses it produces in elsewhere. Yet, the network has also managed to alter these practices to fit the Twitter platform. HBO's tweets reinforce the network's quality through a focus on its original programming, the notable auteurs and stars associated with the network, and laudatory comments from critics and those within the industry.

The majority of HBO's tweeting is of the traditional promotion variety, and unsurprisingly centers on its original series. Gray claims that even with increased branding, "the advertiser is still faced with the same fundamental need to create a desire, hope, and expectation for the show that will convince a consumer to purchase/watch it" (30). Traditional promotional tweets attempt to inform and/or convince users to take an action—namely, to watch an episode about to air live on the network. These tweets often directly address the user and aim to construct a sense of liveness or urgency related to the new episode. For example, HBO's new comedy *Silicon Valley* debuted on April 6, 2014 at 10:02 p.m. At the exact moment that the first episode was about to begin on HBO's schedule, the network Twitter account tweeted:

@HBO: “Big dreams. Corrected vision. Complicated facial hair. @MikeJudge’s
#SiliconValleyHBO starts now. pic.twitter.com/XTTzJ2FBCN”

The tweet communicated a sense of immediacy to users with the note that *Silicon Valley* “starts now,” an immediacy reinforced by the fact that the tweet was sent right as the episode began. It served as a last-minute reminder to users that they did not want to miss the first episode of HBO’s next great comedy. However, this tweet did not deploy desperate hard sell tactics to try to convince users to watch. Santo posits that HBO’s brand “no longer strictly conveys a sense of aesthetic criteria...nor does it identify a particular demographic” (32). In this *Silicon Valley* tweet, HBO did not concern itself with particular information about the series; instead, it simply assumed that the audience knows what kind of quality to expect from the network’s programming. No tangible information about the plot or its style is necessary. Additionally, though Twitter allows networks to target and/or directly engage with particular user basis—an approach that can manifest in something as simple as “Are you watching?” or “RT if you’re watching”—HBO avoided both strategies here, and generally does so with most of its tweets. This tweet was not intended to start a conversation; instead, it mirrors a more traditional type of promotional strategy, just on a new media platform. I would argue that HBO regularly keeps its distance from Twitter users to help reinforce its brand. As a prestige network, HBO does not want to be seen regularly speaking with users in an attempt to convince them to subscribe/watch. People are supposed to want to come to HBO of their own volition.

More importantly, HBO’s tweet mentioned (or linked to the account of) *Silicon Valley*’s co-creator Mike Judge, the well-respected voice behind *Beavis and Butt-head* (1993-1997, 2011), *King of the Hill* (1997-2010), and *Office Space* (1999). Anderson argues that, “HBO promotes the creators of the drama series and encourages reporters to flesh out their biographies

so that the public learns to identify the artistic vision of a single creator behind each series, no matter the scale and complexity of the production or the number of people involved in bringing it to the screen” (36). HBO’s commitment to “a more widespread discourse of authorship in television” (Anderson 37) has extended to the Twittersphere, where details like mentioning Judge here underscore the network’s connection to auteur-like figures. This particular tweet signaled to those unaware of Judge’s involvement in *Valley* that the new series presents a specific worldview and style and perhaps most importantly, that it is worth watching. To illustrate Anderson’s point, *Silicon Valley* is not exclusively a Judge creation; he developed and co-wrote the opening episode promoted by HBO with two, lesser-known writers John Altschuler and Dave Krinsky. Altschuler and Krinsky were not mentioned in this tweet, nor were they mentioned in any of HBO’s tweets about *Silicon Valley* in April 2014. To perpetuate the auteurist vision of the network, HBO simply chose to ignore two of *Valley*’s three creators, implicitly giving credit to Judge above all else. The concentration on auteurs is visible in other HBO activity related to *Silicon Valley* as well.

HBO does not typically participate in the rampant celebratory retweeting of users that can dominate other networks’ accounts. While the network does occasionally highlight the user viewpoint (more on in this below), it is more common for it to retweet congratulatory comments from celebrities or other industry professionals. For example, on April 13, 2014, Mindy Kaling, formerly a writer/star of *The Office* (2005-2013) and current star of her own series *The Mindy Project* (2012-), tweeted the following:

@MindyKaling: “Damn @MikeJudge, Silicon Valley is so fucking good. Everyone watch right now.”

HBO's account retweeted Kaling's adulation for Judge and *Silicon Valley*, and in doing so created an additional affirmation of the quality of the series, Judge's work, and by proxy, the network. In this instance, the praise came not from just some random user who loves *Silicon Valley*; it was another writer, who herself is a budding auteur with a growing profile within the industry. HBO retweeted similar activity from industry professionals on April 27, 2014, the premiere night of *Last Week Tonight* (2014-), the network's answer to *The Daily Show* (1996-) with its former cast member John Oliver. Among those retweets were congratulatory and anticipatory tweets from actors Gillian Jacobs (*Community*) and Colin Hanks (*Fargo*):

@GillianJacobs: "The hilarious, smart, nice and bespectacled @iamjohnoliver has a new show-@lastweektonight. It begins tonight. Congratulations John!"

@ColinHanks: "Very much looking forward to @lastweektonight with the one and only @iamjohnoliver. Ok probably not the only John Oliver, but a GREAT ONE"

Of course, these retweets served as promotion for HBO programming, importantly just a few hours before *Last Week Tonight* aired its first episode. However, this activity also suggested to users that HBO and its collection of talent is *so good* that smart people working within the industry, those making good programming elsewhere, turn to HBO for their personal entertainment.

Discursive Linkages and Synergies

Although HBO regularly uses Twitter to promote its supposedly premium content, either through its own tweets or retweets from notable industry professionals, it also taps into the larger critical discourse about its content to further construct its brand. In her discussion of film

promotion, Klinger claims that production companies strive to “establish a vast array of media contacts with editors and writers...that serve to promote the film through stories on its production and interviews with its stars” (5). HBO has been very skilled over time in using praise from critics and popular press to its advantage in promotional materials (Jaramillo, “Family Racket”; Nelson; Polan). Anderson argues that, “In the echo chamber of cultural production, HBO then feeds the press coverage of its programs back through the public relations machinery, so that people begin to speak about the positive press coverage” (38). Twitter arguably makes this echo chamber more visible and easier to take advantage of through links and retweets. Through these simple strategies, HBO directs users to the commendation heaped upon its programming by prominent critics and press as a way to further legitimate its brand. Example tweets/retweets of this type:

@Vulture (*New York Magazine*'s culture blog): “Watch John Oliver stop by The Daily Show to be British and rub in how much better HBO Is: <http://vult.re/1jL3HQL>” (April 25, 2014)

@latimes: “Billy Crystal revives ‘700 Sundays’ on @HBO for posterity’s sake: <http://lati.ms/vToV6>” (April 17, 2014)

@HBO: “‘Dante, Redemption, and the Last #TrueDetective Essay You Need to Read’ by @ComplexMag: <http://itsh.bo/1gi3ToJ> @McConaughey #WoodyHarrelson” (March 31, 2014)

@sepinwall: “My interview w/”True Detective” creator @nicpizzolatto about the end of season 1 and hints of season 2 <http://tinyurl.com/kz2udkr>” (March 9, 2014)

These four examples—three tweets from elsewhere retweeted by HBO, one direct HBO tweet—exhibited how the network draws from a larger discourse about its brand to underscore its prominence and quality. Retweeting Sepinwall, the U.S.’s most renowned television critic, showed that critics were discussing HBO’s *True Detective* (2014-). This particular tweet’s reference to *True Detective* “creator” Nic Pizzolatto again identified HBO as the place for singular, auteurist figures. Similarly, HBO’s tweet about the *Complex* magazine essay on *True Detective* was loaded with all sorts of signifiers of quality. It referenced the famous and highly regarded poet Dante in the same sentence as *True Detective*, linking great literary figures to the network’s programming. HBO “trains” its audience to “take cultural works to be enigmas or puzzles in which one goes beyond the text at hand to something else” (Polan 280); this sort of training was evident in *True Detective* tweet. The reference to “the Last Essay You Need to Read” suggested that *True Detective* and HBO viewers had already been reading *other* essays about the series—as if that is simply what HBO viewers do. While this tweet did not mention *True Detective*’s creator Pizzolatto, it did include direct mention of the series’ stars Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson. Even without reference to an auteur, HBO still made sure to associate itself with big-name stars, further legitimating the brand.

The retweets of *Vulture* and the *Los Angeles Times* were less imbued with meaning than the other two tweets mentioned above, but they still nodded toward the discursive linkages that occur on Twitter. The tweet about Billy Crystal’s *700 Sundays* (2014) celebrated its famous star and creative force. For HBO, retweeting the *Los Angeles Times*’ praise further underlined the network’s importance in popular culture. However, the *Times*’ decision to mention HBO was

perhaps more interesting. The newspaper's linking to HBO was in itself a signal of the network's brand prominence and value. By referring to HBO in the tweet, the publication was likely anticipating that more users, aware of HBO's brand, would click on the story. Perhaps the *Los Angeles Times* was also hoping that mentioning HBO would inspire the network to retweet the post, opening the story up to a wider audience. Thus, in just one tweet, we can see how other media companies, including those that are recognizable in their own right, view and value the HBO brand. In this sequence of tweeting and retweeting the two brands used one another to legitimate themselves and to reach as many users as possible.

Meanwhile, the *Vulture* tweet about John Oliver's appearance on *The Daily Show* reinforced the perceived "Not TV"-ness of HBO programming, even if it was done in a facetious fashion. Both the tweet and the clip it referred to jokingly alluded to HBO's supposed greatness, particularly in comparison to other networks (in this case, Comedy Central, the home of *The Daily Show*). Santo asserts that HBO is "para-television," in that it claims to be "Not TV," but still "draws upon existing narratives, aesthetics, themes, and economic and institutional practices" (24). Oliver's comments and *Vulture*'s tweet played on this idea, mainly because Oliver's new show, *Last Week Tonight*, is very similar to *The Daily Show*. The primary difference between the two is, of course, that the former is on HBO and is thus "better." Therefore, even when the tweets and headlines knowingly acknowledged the cultural hierarchies between HBO and the rest of television, they still preserved that idea in the discourse—and the idea was only further reinforced by HBO's retweeting of the material.

Retweets lend themselves to the discursive linkages noted in the above tweets, but also to intra-corporate synergy. Grainge defines synergy as "a principle of cross-promotion whereby companies seek to integrate and disseminate their products through a variety of media and

consumer channels, enabling ‘brands’ to travel through an integrated corporate structure” (*Brand Hollywood* 10) For HBO, retweets of multiple accounts associated with the network help create a sort of ecosystem of synergy that further fortifies and disseminates the brand image. This type of tweeting and retweeting often involves the traditional promotional tactics discussed previously—retweeting the *Game of Thrones* account’s plug of a new episode, for example—but it also regularly provides behind-the-scenes access to series, cast members, and more. Recent HBO retweets in this category include:

@GameofThrones: “TODAY AT 12PM ET: Ask questions for a live Q&A with @Maisie_Williams at @HBO Connect. ASK MAISIE: <http://itsh.bo/1jv3LW2> #gameofthrones” (April 23, 2014)

@VeepHBO: “#Veeple, ask @mrmattwalsh anything during his live @reddit_AMA, going on now: <http://itsh.bo/Qeo2q5>” (April 11, 2014)

@rock_hall: “.@springsteen inducts the Big Man, @StevieVanZandt & the rest of the E Street Band into @rock_hall. #rockhall2014 pic.twitter.com/6ejntPodvi” (April 10, 2014)

HBO could have easily tweeted this information out from its account, and in the case of the HBO Connect Q&As, the official network account often does handle that promotion. However, by retweeting the *Game of Thrones* and *Veep* accounts, HBO provided a bit of synergistic promotion to two of its programs and their respective Twitter accounts. The network account and the program accounts are all linked together under the larger HBO umbrella (and possibly operated by the same HBO employees), but these public connections between them point to a larger network ecosystem. Also noteworthy here is how the *Game of Thrones* and *Veep* accounts

more clearly engaged with users: the *Game of Thrones* tweet utilized the all-caps reminder of the Q&A's start time, while the "ASK MAISIE" signified a sense of excitement in being able to chat with one of the program's most popular actors. Meanwhile, the *Veep* tweet produced a pun-worthy nickname in "#Veeple" and reads as if the account were talking more directly to users. Finally, it created a little cross-promotion between HBO, the series, and Reddit, the location of Matt Walsh's Q&A. Cross-promotion was also evident in the third retweet referenced here. HBO's activity tied it to the Rock and the Roll Hall of Fame, an event the network televised in April. HBO's retweeting thus afforded the ceremony with additional publicity, just as it helped link the ceremony to its home on television.

In his discussion of paratexts, Brooker offers the concept of "overflow," wherein texts have so much additional content that it simply cannot be contained by one text; it must flow into the paratexts (456). HBO's Twitter account is a fine example of how content can sometimes overflow even further from particular paratexts as well. HBO's official account primarily tweets traditional promotional material or celebratory discourses about the network, yet its cross-promotional or synergistic retweets introduce additional layers of paratextual content. This is exemplified by the multitude of HBO-related accounts that disseminate this additional content that the official network account often then retweets. Setting aside the accounts for each individual HBO series, the network also operates accounts for its documentaries (@HBODocs), its boxing coverage (@HBOBoxing), its online streaming platform (@HBOGO), and its press team (@HBOPR). The majority of the content on HBO's official account concentrates on its original television series. However, with the separate accounts, HBO manages the overflow of content across different subject matter and can then open the flow of content to bring it back to the network account when most appropriate or beneficial. This assortment of accounts permits

HBO to further diversify, synergize, and target different audiences, while saving the official network account for promotion of its original series that the brand is so closely tied to.

Enabling User Input

HBO's decision to forefront its original series programming on Twitter influences how it engages with non-celebrity users. Johnson describes how network brand management requires an "enabling and utilizing the input of viewers along the way" (*Branding Television* 156) and the nature of Twitter brings the user input right to HBO's digital doorstep, even when the network does not solicit it. More importantly however, is that HBO rarely seeks user input, and usually only does so in ways and at times that do not distract from the network's more direct brand messaging. HBO airs nearly all of its original series programming on Sunday nights and has created "audience identification with Sunday night as belonging to HBO" (Santo 27). This focus is reflected in the HBO's tweets, as much of the network's activity attempts to persuade people to watch on Sunday nights. On Sundays, HBO rarely directly engages with non-celebrities, only occasionally retweeting celebratory comments from 'normal' users. Instead the network account guides users to other (though still network-affiliated) spaces where they can have more engagement with the star performers or writers, primarily through live Q&A's on HBO Connect, a separate website designed specifically for user-performer/creator conversation. As a result, the majority of HBO's Sunday night tweets that reference and/or speak to users look like this:

@HBO: "Have questions about tonight's #SiliconValleyHBO? Ask them for

@Amandacrew's #HBO Connect Q&A & you may get answered

<http://itsh.bo/1jz30wC>" (April 13, 2014)

Here, HBO's account took on a more conversational tone that encourages engagement. Unlike most of the network's tweets, this one prompted users with a direct question and referred to "you." However, this tweet was still more of a broadcast than direct engagement with a specific group of users. Most importantly, this tweet attempted to push participation and conversation to HBO Connect. Not only was this tweet synergistic promotion for an additional HBO-operated online space, but it also reflected that the network views Twitter as a platform for things other than consistent communication with its users. That type of activity has been relegated primarily to Connect. Again, I would posit that this lack of constant engagement with users on Twitter is part of HBO's attempts to keep the exclusivity of its brand alive on the social media platform. While HBO would never publicly deride users because it needs them as subscribers, it also prefers not to engage with them on a regular basis as doing so displays a kind of shamelessness that HBO does not want to present in its brand image. Constant discussion with users would also clutter up HBO's feed and take away from the more traditional promotion the network does for its original programming, especially on Sunday.

However, while HBO angles most of the attention to its Sunday night programming, particularly on Sunday nights, the network account sneaks in more explicit engagement with users during other parts of the week. For example, on Thursday, April 24, 2014, the HBO account sent more than 30 tweets to individual users, all with the exact same text:

@HBO: "We're glad you like #SiliconValleyHBO! Please DM us your full name and address so we can send you some swag from the show."

HBO sent these tweets one after another in rapid succession, presumably because the individual(s) running the network account took note of users praising *Silicon Valley* over the previous few days. The sameness of HBO's comment to these various users showed that this

kind of activity is not really engagement at all; it was a standardized message meant to seem like personalized contact. It is nice of the network to send individuals “swag” from *Silicon Valley*, but it is not as if HBO solicited any real input or perspective from users here. Moreover, using Twitter to send users swag creates the opportunity for the individuals to then tweet about this “direct” contact with HBO and all the great stuff they receive. When this occurs, HBO is quick to retweet users’ gratitude, as they did on April 20, 2014 with @lorddaveed’s “Thanks for the shirt, Richard. #SiliconValleyHBO @HBO” tweet, complete with corresponding photo of the user wearing the shirt. Moreover, HBO retweeting users’ appreciation makes the network look good, and more importantly, look interactive, even if “here is a free shirt” is one of the oldest promotional practices around. The fact that these tweets asked users to DM (or direct message) HBO, invisible to anyone else, further illustrated that the network wanted this conversation, however brief, to happen in private so it would not clutter up its feed or take away from what it considers more important promotional messages.

HBO knows that it needs to engage with its users on Twitter. Since its push for more original series productions, HBO recognized that it cannot “afford to be an occasional-use medium” and that it “need[s] people on a regular basis” (Anderson 33). This sort of mid-week, quasi-engagement helps HBO present the semblance of interactivity that could keep users engaged with the network for more than just its notorious Sunday night programming. However, that said engagement is so inconsistent, so standardized, and pushed to more private conversations, accentuates that HBO does not want to take attention away from its quality original programming. Consequently, HBO’s Twitter activity reinforces its long-running constructed brand image, but is flexible enough to the features of the platform that its activity does not simply seem like unabashed link dumping.

Additionally, consistent and direct engagement with users is not the only thing that is minimized in HBO's Twitter activity. With the focus on new episodes of original series programming, HBO's tweets also ignore the content that fills up the majority of its schedule: feature films and reruns of its original series. This is unsurprising given that this content dominates HBO's schedule during the week, a period that the network uses to promote the original programming coming soon on the weekend. Though HBO hopes to be a "regular" destination for viewers, its Twitter activity suggests that the network hopes that the regularity recurs on Sunday; the rest of the week is less important. Nevertheless, when HBO does reference the feature films airing on its schedule, the logics of its branding strategies reappear. Most notably HBO seems to only tweet about very recent feature films with Hollywood megastars:

@HBO: "Another chance to watch @paulfeig's *The Heat* starring Sandra Bullock and Melissa McCarthy starts now on #HBO." (March 30, 2014)

@HBO: "'I like large parties, they're so intimate.' Another chance to watch *The Great Gatsby* with @LeoDiCaprio starts now on #HBO2" (March 19, 2014)

Here again we see how HBO tried to link up with star power to convince users to watch. This is not a strategy only put forth by HBO. However, the network's choice to frame its feature films just as it does its original series points to how important star power and auteur figures (in this case writer/director Paul Feig) are to the brand. Yet, the above tweets were part of a very small number referencing HBO's feature films from March and April 2014. In fact, after the premieres of *Game of Thrones*, *Veep*, and *Silicon Valley* on April 6, 2014, there were no HBO tweets regarding the films for the rest of the month of April. With important original series on the air, HBO seemingly had no time for the feature films on its schedule.

Conclusion

While this essay presents what I believe to be a representative picture of HBO's Twitter activity, there are of course additional types of tweeting done by the network not mentioned here. It tends to use some of the 'dead time' during the week to promote its original news-oriented programming, *Vice on HBO* (2013-) and *Real Time with Bill Maher* (2003-), and it will also occasionally tweet or retweet HBO-themed ads from corporate partners (or companies simply looking to get attention). Though that activity might push the traditional promotion a little harder than HBO's tweets regarding its Sunday programming, it still often does so with the same reliance on star power, auteurs, critical discourses, and behind-the-scenes access.

Ultimately, HBO's Twitter activity is both surprisingly diverse and unsurprisingly narrow. It is surprisingly diverse in that the network uses the platform for more than simple link dumping or traditional promotion. Yet, it is unsurprisingly narrow because nearly all of HBO's Twitter activity is done with its pre-constructed brand image in mind. The network's tweets almost always have original programming, star power, and discourses of distinction in mind, even in brief promotional tweets or quick moments of pseudo-engagement with users. However, what many of the above examples from HBO illustrate is that constructed brand images consistently and actively leave things out—whether that be different types of programming, different audiences, or even specific time periods when not to push promotion. These missing items are rarely addressed by networks in brands, but also in scholarship *about* network brands.

In scholarly and industry discourse alike, network brands and the specific processes of branding have been taken for granted. When one speaks of 'The HBO Brand', there is a fine chance that others will understand what that means in the abstract—'quality' dramas, prestige, etc.—but there is much less focus on the ways in which a network develops those buzzwords or

associations, or how it might remove other, less beneficial associations, over time. For television scholars, analyzing the processes of branding is crucial to understanding not just promotional strategies or the industry's deployment of new media, but also program development, scheduling, awards, trade discourse, and more. These intersections between programming, promotions, and audience engagement are even more pronounced on social media platforms. HBO's Twitter activity illustrates that the logics of branding flow through everything a network does, down to every 140-character burst. As such, analyzing social media content allows scholars to see how the network brand is constructed in an iterative, up-to-the-minute fashion, and also makes the things left out of the branding process more noticeable.

The good news for scholars is that in an increasingly fragmented marketplace, with the competition not simply between broadcast and cable networks but also emerging 'content providers' like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu, the importance of branding is only going to rise, particularly on social media. Networks or content providers are well aware of viewer multitude options and general interest in social media platforms. Above all else, they want to foster some kind of loyalty with viewers, and it is clear that they believe enticing them sneak peaks, live Q&As, special contests, and behind-the-scenes exclusives on social media platforms is a large part of the strategy to gain that loyalty. Already, there are numerous examples of networks doing fascinating things on Twitter. MTV's account reveals the individual who operates it, user @Kaitiii, and asks the young woman to perform a kind of gushing fandom full of OMGs, exclamation points, and direct chatter with the network's presumably young audience. Meanwhile, Comedy Central's account tries to produce memes and viral content that will draw more attention to its website and schedule.

As branding on social media continues to proliferate, research into these practices should as well. Network branding of course plays a role in much of what happens in the television industry, but the expansion of these practices into social media spaces makes promotional material an even bigger part of everyday life—and oftentimes with content not at all marked as promotion. Although the possibilities of participatory culture and a kind of ‘direct’ engagement with media companies can empower users to feel more like an insider than just a simple fan, cases like HBO signal that participation or engagement almost always come on the media industries’ terms, and generally in ways that benefit their corporate interests above all else. User feedback in these spaces is marginalized, or entirely ignored. Thus, further examination of these practices will expand television and new media scholars’ understanding of how the media industries have made themselves into a ubiquitous—but not innocuous—presence in the lives of viewers/users, with branding often at the center of it all.

Notes

¹ Those using Twitter while watching television could be referred to as any number of things, including users, fans, and viewers. To avoid any confusion in this essay, I have chosen users as it signifies more of a presence on Twitter and makes room for those on Twitter who are not actually watching television.

² Although there are clear differences between a television network and a cable channel, those differences are less important in the 21st century. Today, networks and channels are both often referred to as networks and I have chosen this term for simplicity’s sake (to avoid mentions of “network/channel.”)

³ Ward suggests that brands are “fundamentally” transmedia. Although I share his view of brands existing across different media platform, ‘transmedia’ holds very particular meaning to me, specifically Jenkins’ (2006) assertion that transmedia storytelling tells one story across media. Some network brands do in fact try to cohere on each platform, but rarely do they accomplish this goal. Transmedia is a problematic term in this regard.

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Appendix: Tweet Screenshots in Order of Reference

Images begin on the next page

Game Of Thrones @GameOfThrones Follow

QUIET IN THE REALM. #BreakerofChains starts now on @HBO. Silence your ravens and spread the word. #gameofthrones pic.twitter.com/i0tHyVAROH

Reply Retweet Favorite More

RETWEETS: 2,648 FAVORITES: 2,567

6:00 PM - 20 Apr 2014 Flag media

HBO @HBO Follow

Big dreams. Corrected vision. Complicated facial hair. @MikeJudge's #SiliconValleyHBO starts now. pic.twitter.com/XTTzJ2FBCN

Reply Retweet Favorite More

RETWEETS: 48 FAVORITES: 63

7:02 PM - 6 Apr 2014 Flag media



Mindy Kaling □
@mindykaling

□ Follow

Damn @MikeJudge, Silicon Valley is so fucking good. Everyone watch right now

□ Reply □ Retweet □ Favorite □ More

RETWEETS
208

FAVORITES
722



1:38 PM - 13 Apr 2014



Gillian Jacobs ✓
@GillianJacobs



□ Follow

The hilarious, smart, nice and bespectacled @iamjohnoliver has a new show- @lastweektonight. It begins tonight. Congratulations, John!

↩ Reply ↻ Retweet ★ Favorite ⋮ More

RETWEETS
43

FAVORITES
142



10:31 AM - 27 Apr 2014


Colin Hanks ✓
 @ColinHanks
 ⚙
Follow

Very much looking forward to [@lastweektonight](#) with the one and only [@iamjohnoliver](#). Ok probably not the only John Oliver, but a GREAT ONE

↩ Reply
 ↻ Retweet
 ★ Favorite
 ⋮ More

RETWEETS **15** FAVORITES **55**



10:28 AM - 27 Apr 2014


Vulture □
 @vulture
 Follow

Watch John Oliver stop by The Daily Show to be British and rub in how much better HBO is: vult.re/1jL3HQL

□ Reply
 □ Retweet
 □ Favorite
 □ More

RETWEETS **7** FAVORITES **36**



5:50 AM - 25 Apr 2014 Flag media


Los Angeles Times □
 @latimes
 Follow

Billy Crystal revives '700 Sundays' on [@HBO](#) for posterity's sake: lati.ms/vToV6

□ Reply
 □ Retweet
 □ Favorite
 □ More

RETWEETS **14** FAVORITES **7**



8:40 AM - 17 Apr 2014 Flag media



HBO
@HBO

Follow

"Dante, Redemption, and the Last
#TrueDetective Essay You Need to Read" by
@ComplexMag: itsh.bo/1gi3ToJ
@McConaughey #WoodyHarrelson

Reply Retweet Favorite More

RETWEETS
122

FAVORITES
218



3:38 PM - 31 Mar 2014

Flag media



Alan Sepinwall
@sepinwall

Follow

My interview w/"True Detective" creator
@nicpizzolatto about the end of season 1 and
hints of season 2 hitfix.com/whats-alan-wat...

Reply Retweet Favorite More


RETWEETS
157

FAVORITES
224



10:19 PM - 9 Mar 2014

Flag media

 **Game Of Thrones** 
@GameOfThrones  [Follow](#)

TODAY AT 12PM ET: Ask questions for a live Q&A with @Maisie_Williams at @HBO Connect. ASK MAISIE: itsh.bo/1jv3LW2
#gameofthrones

 Reply  Retweet  Favorite  More

 HBO

HBO Connect | Game of Thrones Q&A with Maisie Williams
By Maisie Williams @Maisie_Williams
Visit the Q&A with Maisie Williams from Game of Thrones or browse through archived events now at HBO Connect.
[View on web](#)

RETWEETS	FAVORITES
75	124



10:25 AM - 23 Apr 2014 [Flag media](#)

 **Veep** 
@VeepHBO [Follow](#)

#Veep, ask @mrmattwalsh anything during his live @reddit_AMA, going on now:
itsh.bo/Qeo2q5

 Reply  Retweet  Favorite  More

RETWEETS	FAVORITES
2	3



1:29 PM - 11 Apr 2014



Rock Hall
@rock_hall

Follow

.@springsteen inducts the Big Man,
@StevieVanZandt & the rest of the E Street
Band into @rock_hall. #rockhall2014
pic.twitter.com/6ejntPodvi

Reply Retweet Favorite More



RETWEETS
699

FAVORITES
723



10:14 PM - 10 Apr 2014

[Flag media](#)



HBO
@HBO

Follow

Have questions about tonight's
#SiliconValleyHBO? Ask them for
@Amandacrew's #HBO Connect Q&A & you
may get answered itsh.bo/1jz30wC

Reply Retweet Favorite More

RETWEETS
7

FAVORITES
4



7:30 PM - 13 Apr 2014

[Flag media](#)

HBO @HBO · Apr 24

@DayleForness We're glad you like #SiliconValleyHBO! Please DM us your full name and address so we can send you some swag from the show.

← ↻ ★ 1 ...

HBO @HBO · Apr 24

@Deathpanda313 We're glad you like #SiliconValleyHBO! Please DM us your full name and address so we can send you some swag from the show.

← ↻ ★ 1 ...

HBO @HBO · Apr 24

@beardtalk We're glad you like #SiliconValleyHBO! Please DM us your full name and address so we can send you some swag from the show.

← ↻ ★ ...



lord david
@lorddaveed

Follow

Thanks for the shirt, Richard.
#SiliconValleyHBO @HBO
pic.twitter.com/mteH1gk0zs

Reply Retweet Favorite More



RETWEETS
15

FAVORITES
43



7:02 PM - 20 Apr 2014

Flag media



[Follow](#)

"I like large parties, they're so intimate."
Another chance to watch The Great Gatsby
with [@LeoDiCaprio](#) starts now on [#HBO2](#)

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

RETWEETS: **19**
FAVORITES: **28**



4:30 PM - 18 Mar 2014



[Follow](#)

Another chance to watch [@paulfeig](#)'s The
Heat starring Sandra Bullock and Melissa
McCarthy starts now on [#HBO](#).

[Reply](#) [Retweet](#) [Favorite](#) [More](#)

RETWEETS: **16**
FAVORITES: **33**



5:30 PM - 30 Mar 2014