The Community of “Community”: Fandom, Television & Audience Agency

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Abstract: Empowerment through the Internet is an emerging phenomenon, and the same can be said about television audience agency. With the American television sitcom "Community" as our case study, we conducted surveys, interviews, and content analyses to detail fans and their works, and how they can make an impact with their voice. The Internet is rapidly altering how people watch and interact with television, and "Community" is a prime, contemporary example of this as fans have once before changed its fate of cancellation and are now attempting to do the same again as of May 2014. Our research follows the fans' call-to-arms, as they rallied together to petition companies such as Hulu and Netflix to revive "Community" for its sixth season. Course concepts that we detail are emic and etic, debate in culture, and affordance and agency.

Introduction:

In the ever-transforming digital age of the Internet, it is no surprise that television watching habits would change along with it. At the click of the mouse, videos can be streamed and accessed within seconds, rather than waiting for a show to air at a specific time on a specific day. The phenomenon known as binge watching, or watching consecutive shows and videos in one sitting, has become increasingly popular with the emergence of streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, and YouTube. Not only has television consumption become a new entity, but the ways in which television audiences can express their devotion to a show is revolutionizing as well. Websites like Reddit, Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook have become hubs where fans flock to to debate, discuss, and divulge aspects of their favorite shows with other fellow fans. By expressing their thoughts in such an open medium for all to see, the Internet and fandom manifestation have inevitably lead to a narrower gap between creators and consumers. Fans now have more control and agency than ever to participate with the shows they watch, and this is only possible because of the Internet.

This new culture of fandom expression and power that are emerging is the focal point for our research project. With the American television sitcom “Community” as our case study, we aimed to discover how exactly the Internet affords for a more robust form of audience agency.
“Community” has a very strong cult following that is extremely vocal and protective of the show. When there was a hiatus for the show, fans started a campaign (#SaveCommunity) to get “Community” back on the air. After trending on Twitter, flash mobs, and a CollegeHumor YouTube video with the cast, it was announced that “Community” would be returning. Fans rejoiced, but again the show is in danger. With “Community” officially being cancelled on May 9th, 2014, we followed the Subreddit online community for “Community” as they rallied together and petitioned Netflix and Hulu to revive it one last time for the sixth season that the fans desperately want for closure, and ultimately because “Community” fans believe they deserve it after years of struggle. Their voice is being heard however; as of May 28th, Sony Pictures TV is “in talks” with Hulu for a possible revival of “Community” (Deadline). Only time will tell if these devoted fans can save their show yet again.

Our research question that we based our studies on was, “How does the internet and community-driven websites, such as Reddit, allow for the 'Community' fanbase to transcend from passive audience watchers to online activists with agency, who can even change the very show they're watching?” Course concepts that we explored and tied to our research are emic and etic, affordance and agency, and how culture is molded through debate. Online communities, such as the Subreddit community we observed, have their own culture and in many aspects can be considered a virtual world. As “virtual worlds are self-evidently social constructions,” the same can be said for online communities of fans (Boellstorff, 17). Fans make and manage the space that they congregate in, and this is important to our research as it embodies the concepts of emic and etic, for that in order to understand the fandom of a show, one must be a part of the “in-crowd.” “Community” is a show filled to the brim with inside jokes, so it has a very tight-knit personality that only its fans can appreciate. When the main director got replaced (more on this
in the history section), fans were livid because the charm of the show that they grew to love and relate with dissipated. After a lackluster season in the fans' eyes and an outcry, the original director was reinstated, showcasing just how much of an impact debate can have. The Internet is an accessible platform for human action, and the fans of “Community” have most definitely become actors of agency, as our findings will detail.

The History of Community:

Community is an American TV sitcom that aired on NBC starting September 2009. The show focuses on the adventures of a study group at a community college. Its comedy thrives off of meta humor, pop culture, recurring inside jokes and the cast of characters. Despite the love from critics and fans, the show has had a troubled history. There was a mid season hiatus in 2012, and fans feared that the show was cancelled and they started acting. A flash mob was done at Rockefeller Center to garner attention. CollegeHumor made a video with the cast of the show, asking fans to save it. There was a kickstarter for an art show paying tribute to the show. NBC aired the remaining episodes later, after much unrest from fans. Dan Harmon was later fired, for various reasons; missing deadlines leading to table read delays leading to all-nighters, alcoholism, harsh perfectionism, etc. With Harmon’s departure, other writers and staff left as well. Season four’s new showrunners were Moses Port and David Guarascio. Viewers and critics noticed the difference; it had a mixed reception and wasn’t as critically lauded as the three before it. For season five, Harmon was rehired, but this season would be the last. NBC cancelled Community in May 2014. The ever passionate fanbase instantly started contacting Hulu and Netflix to see if they could take the show and give it a sixth season.
Literature Review

Though our research revolves around the idea of how the Internet and community-driven websites allow fandoms to become online activists with agency, there have been extensive amounts of research on this idea by others in the past. The three concepts that were previously studied that will be analyzed are the impact of the digital era amongst fandoms, the fans’ impact on media through their activities, and the relationships between fans and producers. These three concepts will help to describe certain aspects of our project and help us gain a better insight on the trends and patterns of online fandom.

The rise of technology made way for fandoms to develop and grow as a community. Pearson (2010) researched the impact that the digital era had on fandom. She argues that with the help of digital innovations, fans made their way towards the front of the transformations in the media industry. Several reasons why this is possible is because the digital era is “empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans” (Pearson, 84). As a result, the digital era gives rise to many more thinkers who express their opinions through blogs and online journals. It gives them a window of opportunity to reach out one another and to the producers and other communities more effectively. Fred Turner (2005) mentioned in his article a similar concept of the impact of digital technologies within detached individuals. He elaborates on the WELL and how it “became a forum within which geographically dispersed individuals could build a sense of nonhierarchical, collaborative community around their interactions” (Turner, 491). Thus, the digital revolution has had a profound impact towards fandom. It has strengthened them by developing a convenient way for people to express their thoughts and insights as well as gathering communities from all over the world together.

Fans of T.V shows play a significant role towards the show through their actions and
online activity. Costello and Moore (2007) studied the activity of online fans through their use of the Internet for keeping up with their favorite television program. By conducting extensive interviews and analyzing feedback from 757 participants, Costello and Moore discovered that Internet technologies “empower fans to more effectively organize en masse as resisters and shapers of commercial television narratives” (Costello and Moore, 124). They found out that online fans expressed their affections toward television shows by building or visiting websites associated with that program. Furthermore, these online fans interacted with other fans that shared a common interest towards the same TV show. From this the authors justified how the Internet was viewed as the medium for its flexibility and ease in its ability to bring fandom communities and other sources of information together. For example, Costello and Moore (2007) talked about community on the Internet, where fans discuss their amusement and repulse at the plot, dialogue and character developments. Because these fandom communities shared a common interest with an access to the Internet, they were able to discuss the show, analyze it, and network with each other about it. One of the most extravagant discoveries about the fandom community is that they have the potential to control the life and death of a television series. Although “that power is usually in the hands of a network executive or, for a syndicated series, a production company, online fans believe they can prevent the cancellation of a program or even resurrect it after the decision has been made to end it. Dedicated fans had organized mail campaigns and known some success, but online fans can move more quickly, organize more people, and generally be more effective” (Costello and Moore, 138). Therefore, online fans use the Internet for the purpose of expressing their regards to that show, engaging with other communities, and potentially saving a show from being canceled.

Regarding the relationship between the fans and producers of a certain T.V show, it
appears that fans respond negatively when their expectations disagree within the producers of the show. Williams (2010) examined the relationships between fan and producer within the online fandom of the Australian soap opera “Neighbours” to observe how such interactions function within soap fandom. By applying sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu’s field theory, Williams was able to better understand the fierce clashes between fans and the creators of fan objects. Through Bourdieu’s field theory, Williams (2010) argued that it “allows us to examine how fans negotiate power within their fan cultures, particularly within fan-producer relationships” (281). In her study, Williams (2010) focused on the online forum NeighboursFans and analyzed up to 25 threads and 2500 posts. What she discovered was that hostile and antagonistic relationships between fans and producers may arise if fans are unhappy with the current storylines. In other words, tensions arise among those who control and dictate television shows and to those who have a passionate emotional feeling towards them. The reason for this is because “fans who devote time, money, and energy to following a show feel a sense of ownership over it which can be threatened when their desires and interpretations are not in tune with those of the production team” (Williams, 283). Thus, fans and producers who serve to act as agents in the broadcasting field struggle and compete with each other for control, authority, and power.

Methods:

Sample & Design

We wanted to cover all angles and varied opinions from participants of fandom and Community fans. To do this, we conducted interviews, two surveys, content analysis and observation on Reddit/Twitter. The survey’s main demographic consisted of college-students around 20 years old. A majority of the content analysis was centered on posts and fan-art from Tumblr, Reddit, and Twitter.
Results:

-Surveys:

For our quantitative data collection, we distributed two online surveys and received a total of twenty-five responses. The average age of our respondents were between twenty and twenty-two, with the youngest being under eighteen and the oldest being thirty-two. We believed it was important to note the age of our respondents because online fandom expression is usually associated with younger audience members. The results from our survey detailed that over half (52%) preferred to watch their television shows on paid streaming sites (i.e., Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc.). Free online streaming sites (YouTube, Vimeo, Metacafe, etc.) and torrenting/downloading tied with 19% of our survey participants preferring them, and only 10% of our participants actually preferred cable television. This data showcases the aforementioned shift from cable television to online streaming sites, especially since 71% of our participants said they binge watch, which is becoming a common occurrence with online streaming. In our additional comments question, some respondents listed which shows that they binge watch and many reported that they watch one show at a time, and usually binge watch to catch up on shows.

81% of our respondents stated they felt the Internet has changed how they interact with television shows and 29% said they participate in online fandom. When asked which sites they participated in for online fandom, 52% of our participants reporting using Facebook, 43% used YouTube, 33% were on Tumblr, 14% had a personal blog that they used, 5% contributed to a fandom Wikia, and 10% were a part of Reddit. One respondent said “YouTube is the most used fandom I've used because of its diversity in music [and] short films,” while another who preferred Tumblr stated it was their favorite because it “allows [for them] to connect with other fans, without feeling judged.” There are multiple online platforms for expressions of fandom, yet
there isn't one over-arching site that is preferred by everyone.

-Interviews:

We interviewed a total of four people that are a part of the “Community” fandom for our qualitative aspect of data. These individuals’ locations ranged from Toronto, Canada, to Southern California. Each interview took about 25-30 minutes, depending on the medium (instant messaging, Skype, in person). The interviews were one-on-one and semi-structured.

We asked people to interview based on whether they “liked” Community on Facebook, their participation in the fandom, or relevant experiences around the television show.

Examples of questions we asked were:

- How big of a fan are you?
- Do you think the show will be renewed?
- What is your perspective on fandom?
- What makes the “Community” fandom so passionate and unique?

Afif M.*, who considers himself to “have a bit of a nerdy streak,” is a big fan of the show because he can understand the references and parodies that “Community” is known for. Afif watches “Community” on Hulu most of the time and said that he actually does not watch much television anymore, television being cable. When he was being interviewed, he actually pondered if this is perhaps the reason why “Community” has been cancelled. He makes a point that “The young college audience [“Community”] was targeting don't really have time or want to see it on T.V. when it's scheduled, and would rather watch it online on their own time.” Not everyone can sit down at scheduled times to watch their shows on cable, so he makes a valid point that perhaps streaming is becoming increasingly popular since it is on demand for people to access wherever and whenever.
Tobias Q.*, another interviewee, said that he is a fan of “Community,” that does not partake in the fandom, but is aware of how passionate it is. He states that “fandoms are at [their] apex these days, especially with things like Kickstarter...fans contribute to its survival and success.” An interesting thought that Tobias mentions about fandom is that he does not like the idea of “collective ownership” because it is hard to draw the line between “pleasing the fans [and] being their slaves.” He believes that when creators cater to fans, it is “copping out” and that “we'll be seeing a lot more of [this], especially now where new media is giving the power to the viewers.” Tobias is a fan who believes that fans actually have too much power now with the introduction of the Internet. They can manipulate the creators into taking directions with a show they normally wouldn't because, as succinctly said by Tobias, “at the end of the day, fans are passionate consumers” and creators want their shows to remain popular. Tobias currently works at a television station and writes scripts for shows. His spec for Community got recognized at a well-known film festival in the United States.

We also were able to interview Marc V.*, a young man who started the Netflix petitioning chain on Subreddit after the announcement that “Community” had been officially cancelled. When questioned why he decided to take action on the Subreddit community, he said that he felt like he “needed to do something” because no one seemed to be making any effort of rallying the fans together. Marc feels like they deserve a sixth season at this point because the end goal of “Community” has always been “six seasons and a movie.” He said that with the cancellation, “they got caught right before” they received their closure that they have fought so long for. Marc believes that “the fans are as big a part of the show as the creators are” because “Community” is a television show where the creators actually acknowledge and participate with the fanbase; the Subreddit community of “Community” has even received a shoutout on the
show as the /r/community tag was shown on a blackboard in a scene. This back-and-forth dynamic between fans and creators that is emerging is hotly debated; some fans revel in the agency that comes with the Internet, while others view creators in a more pandering light.

Lastly, we interviewed Keaton N.*, a writer for his university’s local newspaper. He often writes articles for the entertainment column and wrote an article on Community and it’s cancellation. He considers himself a dedicated fan. In the past, he posted on Community’s Facebook page about getting the show back and received “the most likes and comments” he’s ever gotten on Facebook, showing how receptive Community’s fanbase is. He has also attended Comic Con and met the cast of Community. “It was amazing and I got to have unique conversations with fans just as passionate as me,” he stated. When asked why Community fans were so passionate he said it “takes sitcom tropes and pop culture references” to transform it into a show that has “never been done before.” He also noted how the cast of Community has a warm relationship with the fans over Twitter.

*Note: All of the names and personal information of our interview participants were changed to protect their identities.

Content Analysis

We regularly checked http://reddit.com/r/community, Twitter, and Tumblr for content that the fans made or just discussed. Our results are shown below.

"Community re-watch-a-thon-a-ganza"

On the popular Community subreddit, someone initiated an "episode-a-week" re-watching marathon. Each week they have a discussion about the episode in the comments under
the post. They dissect the episode and talk about things they enjoyed or noticed that they never noticed before. This can be paralleled to a book club, except for a television show, and with a large amount of people participating online.

The active fans of Community retain a cohesiveness even after the show is cancelled. Because of the ability to congregate and share ideas on a forum-like website, it is quick and convenient to express one's thoughts on a show. This can be linked to what many of our interviewees said about fandom: Fandoms started in cosplay, where fans met up in person and dressed up/bought merchandise. Now, it is much more accessible to a larger audience and there is public space that has constant access.

Conclusion:

With our research, we hope to have expanded a bit on the scholarly research performed before us on fandom culture, specifically fandom agency. The “Community” fanbase have become an audience with power through debate with television networks, and are the lifeblood of the show that are constantly putting pressure on developers with their vocality. From our survey and interviews, the general consensus is that people believe the Internet is changing how audience members watch their television shows. The majority of our participants involved in our study watch their shows in an online format, whether it be free or paid streaming, or torrenting and downloading. This says a lot about how there is a shift from cable and satellite to watching television online. Shows can be found instantaneously online, at any time of any day, which is why a lot of people seem to prefer it to cable.

The Internet is changing not only how people watch (binge watching, streaming, etc.), but how they are able to actually interact with their favorite programs, instead of just passively watching. Long ago are the days where fans would send letters detailing their thoughts to the
companies of their favorite shows. With the Internet today, fans can group easier than ever, and faster than ever as well. Our interviewee Marc V. demonstrated this as he rallied the Subreddit community and started a tidal wave of fandom expression, voice, and activeness. Not only can fans group easier, but they can receive instant feedback from producers, resulting in a conversation, or debate, taking place between consumer and creator. The Internet affords agency to the fan on a grander scale than has ever been seen before, and the power dynamic between fans and creators will continue to morph and change. The community of “Community” is just one fanbase; there are fandoms for every imaginable show. Audience agency is an everyday occurrence that can be as simple as writing a tweet on Twitter about a scene in a show that you just saw. It does not have to be extreme to be effective. On the Internet, there is always at least one other person listening to what you have to say.
Works Cited:


