

Netflix, transfandom and “trans TV”: Where data-driven fandom meets fan reflexivity

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In this brief intervention I want to argue for a distinctive approach to media fandom in relation to developments in ‘television’, as this is understood to operate via the Netflix platform and brand (Jenner, 2016 and 2018; Havens, 2018; Lobato, 2018; Wu, 2013). Though it has been argued that audience studies to date has placed too much emphasis on exploring the particularities of fans (Gray, 2017: 80) as opposed to investigating “general” audiences, at the same time the line between fans as a “special type of audience” (Gray, 2017: 80) and the mainstream/general audience has begun to blur, thanks in part to the rise of TV “bingeing” as a normative practice (Jenner, 2015: 13–14) as well as social media’s intensified everydayness. This has led to debates in fan studies about whether fandom should be equated with “fan community” (Jenkins, 1992: 40), as Francesca Coppa (2014) argues, or whether fandom can be interpreted as an individualised emotional experience of media consumption. For Coppa, this runs the risk of “reducing *all* fans to followers” (2014: 80), i.e. those who use social media “as directed” (2014: 75) by corporate actors, without identifying as part of fan communities (2014: 80). This schism in fan studies has also been captured by debates cleaving contemporary fandom into “traditional” modes – fan community again – and “brand” fans (Linden and Linden, 2017: 37). The second edition of *Fandom* engages in this debate by suggesting that both traditional-communal and atomised, individualised fans might be analysed: “Studies of fans need not all be discussing the same types of fans, practices, or engagements to have a symphonic quality when considered in total” (Sandvoss et al., 2017: 10).

However, this call for a harmonious overlay of particular/general or communal/individual fandoms doesn’t consider how there is a kind of transfandom at work here, not in the sense of fan practices moving nomadically across texts, but rather in terms of fans and scholars *ranging analytically and interpretively across very different discourses of fandom*. We might similarly identify Netflix as generating a version of “trans TV” – television that is, itself, discursively multiple by virtue of co-opting broadcast TV programme brands (Johnson, 2012) as ‘Netflix Originals’ in specific territories, whilst rendering formerly ‘terrestrial’, linearly scheduled TV shows as part of a non-linear catalogue. At least some of Netflix’s programme brands are more-or-less ghosted by their linear TV histories, and by fan knowledge of these prior contexts, such as Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* which originated as a UK Channel 4 programme before becoming a Netflix production. Whilst Netflix may aim to place programme brands in dialogue with its overarching “service brand” of algorithmic customisation, as Timothy Havens has argued (2018: 329), this dialectic cannot wholly overwrite the broadcast, linear TV histories that are bound up with the premieres, national broadcast ratings, and cultural presences of, say, BBC programme brands hosted on Netflix. Both Netflix and fandom, I would argue, thus need to be considered here as necessarily hybridised and multi-discursive in a series of ways, rather than Netflix being singularly positioned as a matter of its TV “catalogs” (Lobato, 2018), or as a new type of “portal” (Lotz, 2017), and rather than fandom being singularly positioned as a matter of “traditional” community (or not).

Theorising *multi-discursive fandom* allows for the possibility of “tension between the characterization of an individualized hyper-connected media environment and the notion of audience experiences, or between intrusive media and newer literacies as a potential

response. ...This... sits within a necessary impetus to research audiences' engagements and encounters with dataism and datafication in their lived everyday lives" (Ytre-Arne and Das, 2018: 4). Or, as Dan Hassler-Forest has written autoethnographically, of his own fan experience of Netflix's *Stranger Things*:

as much as I did enjoy it, there was also something uncanny... that I found even more unsettling than the [show's monstrous] "Demogorgon" ... It was the sense that there was something mechanical, something pre-programmed, even something truly inevitable about my first response to the show: almost literally as if it had been tailor-made just for me (Hassler-Forest, 2016).

This fan audience commentary gestures to tensions in Netflix's "mathematization of taste" (Alexander, 2016) where Netflix-commissioned textual products are themselves "in part algorithmic, designed for and structured within the broader abstraction aesthetic of Netflix, [with] particular traces of this corporate, computational authorship emerg[ing both] in the show itself" (Finn, 2017: 103) and in fans' reflexive awareness of being targeted by datafication. As David Beer has observed, algorithmic targeting of audiences mean that cultural and textual encounters can be "shaped by culture finding-us... decoupled from the types of socialisation processes that are more dependent on friendship groups [or fan communities – MH] and the consumption of the right type of broadcast media outputs" (Beer, 2013: 95–96).

The result is not that Netflix can straightforwardly refine "'how fans are made', as [its Chief Content Officer, Ted] Sarandos puts it" (Finn, 2017: 100), but that multi-discursive fandom can be experienced as uncannily divided and split into lived fan tastes, and the ghosted image of a datafied fan profile into which one has been simultaneously sorted (or interpellated) by Netflix. As John Cheney-Lippold points out, despite his book-length focus on algorithmic culture not addressing fan identity, "[m]easurable types... compile different data into an intelligible whole, which is then used to manage... a population... You are not you, with all the intricacies that make you you. You are a... member of... different categories" (2017: 97) such as horror/SF/Spielberg/1980s blockbuster fandom(s) in the case of *Stranger Things*.

Tim Wu (2013) rather hyperbolically argues that Netflix represents a "future based fundamentally on fandom", with a shared mainstream, national-mass culture of TV consumption being replaced by transnational (and massified) niches representing "islands of fandom". But this is 'fandom' rendered as a measurable type, or set of data points, rather than a lived experience and history of fan community, consumption and affect; it is where datafication's "terms of control regulate, as well as epistemologically establish, the standards by which we, reconceptualised as measurable types, are positioned as subjects through data" (Cheney-Lippold, 2017: 99). Netflix's seemingly accurate capturing (and captivation) of fan taste is left feeling somehow uncannily simulated or derived. The form of multi-discursive fandom resonating with the work of Brita Ytre-Arne and Ranjana Das (2018) and Hassler-Forest (2016) is hence one where distinctively data-driven fandom meets embodied fan reflexivity – where fan *and* follower collide in an over-determined moment of industrial co-option, individualised personalisation, and lived fan (communal) experience. This "trans TV" calls up not just "fans of... original content, ...in many ways... the most truly distinctive product Netflix has to offer" (Havens, 2018: 330), but self-divided examples of

transfandom where television/genre fans reflexively negotiate their sense of fitting into, and resisting, fandom newly datafied as a “measurable type”.

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