From Usenet to Tumblr: The changing role of social media

Rhiannon Bury, Athabasca University, Canada
Ruth Deller, Sheffield Hallam University, UK
Adam Greenwood, Sheffield Hallam University, UK
Bethan Jones, Aberystwyth University, UK

Abstract:
The advent of social networking sites has made communication faster and easier than ever, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in fan communities. Bury (2005) argues that media fans have always been early adopters of new information and communication technologies, suggesting that from Usenet to LiveJournal, fans have established a variety of innovative practices to engage with their favourite media texts and each other. In the age of Facebook and Twitter, however, fans are not only able to engage with one another; they can have a direct impact on how some of their favourite fannish objects are made and marketed (Bennett, 2012).

      This forum discussion seeks to examine the ways in which this type of participatory fandom has altered the traditional relationship between fans and producers, making the fan-producer boundary more 'leaky' (Haraway, 1988). Much academic work thus far has focussed on television audiences' use of Twitter (Deller, 2011) but we seek to open the debate and question the ways in which other forms of social media like Facebook and Tumblr contribute to the shifting nature of fan communities. Among the questions we address in the course of this discussion are: how do older fans, such as those of British singer Cliff Richard, use social media to enhance, rather than replace, their experiences in older forms of internet community? How have older fandoms such as *Star Trek: TOS, Blake's 7* and *The X-Files* adopted new technologies to keep the fandom alive? What is the role of older technologies, such as listservs, and social networking sites, such as LiveJournal, in fan community making? How do guitar bands and their fans use Facebook, and how does this affect the audience-producer relationship? Finally, is online participatory culture becoming more global as a result of shifting patterns of audience reception?

Introduction

The problem with co-writing a paper with three other authors, across two continents and time zones, is that it's very hard to get everyone in the same place at the same time. To overcome this, we drew on the gender and fan culture posts hosted by Henry Jenkins on his blog, *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. Jenkins hosted a series of conversations among male and female researchers doing work on fan productivity, participatory culture, cult media and transmedia narratives, which were 'designed to try to better understand the common ground and gender differences in the ways they are approaching their topic' (2007, online). Each week during the summer of 2007, Jenkins paired up male and female scholars who shared similar interests but who might not have known each other, for the purpose of a public conversation which sought to explore commonalities and differences in the ways they approach the work. We felt that a similar method would prove beneficial to analysing the changing role of social media in fandom, and so began a series of emails that took us through the autumn of 2012, culminating in this article.

The four participants in this conversation are a diverse group in terms of the stages in their careers and their involvement in fan studies and fandom. This diversity in academic approaches and personal experience has enabled us to cover a range of areas. Rather than come to any definite conclusions about the current state of fan studies and its future, we used this opportunity to pose four broad questions. These covered the ways in which older fans and fandoms adopt and use new technologies, whether the importance of social media in both fandom and fan-producer relationships is being overstated, how producers use new forms of social media to relate to their fans and if social media and new technologies actually do allow for a change in these relationships. We felt that asking these questions of a diverse set of scholars would complicate existing assumptions about the role (and history) of social media and fan communities. We also hoped that it would raise questions which, individually, we may not have thought of.

The goal of the Fan Studies Network is to cultivate a space in which scholars can easily forge connections with other academics and discuss the latest topics within fan studies. We hope that this conversation will add to the debate the network is engendering, and look forward to reading your comments. Lastly, we hope this conversation will prove as interesting to read as it was to discuss.

How do older fans, and older fandoms, adopt and use new technologies?

Rhiannon Bury: As someone who has been researching online fan culture and community since the mid-1990s, I have a particular interest in the first question on older fans and new

technologies. The members of the David Duchovny Estrogen Brigades who participated in my doctoral research are now all over 40, with the oldest in their late fifties. By 2006, when I conducted a small follow up study on the personal friendships that developed from the three private listservs, a few members had joined LiveJournal and were involved in other fandoms. The rest were no longer active in participatory fandom and only the original DDEB listserv was active.

Bethan Jones: From my experience in X-Files fandom there seems to be a clear divide between the 'older' fans who use Haven and Gossamer and the 'newer' fans who use LiveJournal and Archive of Our Own and Bertha Chin talks about this division in her PhD. Having said that though, I do have middle-aged friends in fandom who are using Tumblr (which I think, according to a lot of scholarship anyway, is predominantly used by younger people), although they seem to primarily reblog, rather than creating their own posts (I'm guilty of doing the same).

Ruth Deller: The Cliff Richard fans I have studied are interesting – this is a fandom that skews predominantly over 50 and almost 50% over 60. There's a hardcore group of around 400 who have been part of a long-standing mailing list which has been running since 1995. Most of them have been on the list for over five years, and many for over ten. They use many other platforms in their fandom, from the singer's official forum to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (there's less evidence they use Tumblr and Pinterest) but they integrate the discussion of those technologies back into the older list format. Many of them express a preference for the mailing list even though the list can have discussions for days about what happens on Facebook or Twitter! I witnessed several of them discovering Twitter together a few months ago – learning how to use the tech and encouraging each other onto it. Interestingly, that's how I first got onto Twitter, through the LowCulture forum whereby we all started to test the Twitter waters together and use the forum as a place to discuss Twitter, so I understand why they do that.

RB: Bethan, I think your observation of the age divide in contemporary X-Files fandom is accurate. I suspect that the older fans are sticking with the older technologies not because they are unwilling to try or not are interested in the newer ones but because they are comfortable in the spaces they have created with those technologies. This seems to hold true for the Cliff Richard fans that Ruth studies, an even older demographic than the DDEBS. To answer this question of use of social media by older fans, I examined the data sets involving age and social media from my Television 2.0 research project. Looking at the survey data (n=671), I have to say that I was really surprised at the lack of statistically significant differences between the youngest (18-29) and oldest (60+) cohorts in terms of LiveJournal and Facebook use for fan-related activities. (I did not have a question about Tumblr.) The qualitative analysis supports this. Regardless of age, those who used Live Journal commented on its centrality to their fan practices (primarily for reading and sharing

fanfiction) and its role in community making. Only one participant over 50 claimed to have found it too confusing to use and remained exclusively on lists and Yahoo groups. As for Facebook, all cohorts reported non-use or limited use due to privacy concerns. Several stated that Facebook was not a 'fannish space.' Although not statistically significant, I did find that more participants over 40 reported use of Facebook to get information about favourite shows or to 'like' series in Facebook and/or to include updates from in their news feeds.

As for Twitter, two different statistical measures indicate that younger fans are more likely to use Twitter in relation to fan activity than older ones. My analysis of the interview data, however, did not turn up age-based patterns of use. Similarly, a portion of all age groups claimed not to use twitter. As for Tumblr, only two participants over 40 mentioned using it, one quite extensively. One participant over 30 commented on feeling 'almost too old'. Most of the comments about Tumblr use came from those under 30.

RD: Within the Sims fandom there appear to be more Sims 2 users on LiveJournal and more Sims 3 users on Tumblr. This partly skews age-wise with the newer game fans often being a bit younger, but that's not entirely true, as the demographics for Sims 3 go from pre-teens to people in their fifties (and older, but the fandom tails off massively at that stage) – although this is a strongly female-oriented fandom too which I think is perhaps interesting in terms of fan practice. These fans navigate a range of online platforms but there is a hardcore of Sims 2 fandom who are reluctant to embrace newer forms like Facebook, Tumblr and Wordpress in the way the Sims 3 fans (and many other Sims 2 players) have. The refuseniks – often LJ users and users of particular, longer-established forums, tend to call the Tumblr users '12s'.

I think Facebook is very interesting though, for the lack of a visible fan community in the ways we've perhaps become used to on other platforms. That said, there is one Facebook group I am part of that feels a bit more traditionally like a fan 'community' as we used to know them - The Art of Neighbours - it started out as a few people setting up this group as an affectionate 'tribute'/ribbing to the show - making 'art' in MS Paint about the show and it's now several thousand strong and has become as much like a forum would be, with people discussing the show, as a platform for the arts - people occasionally have meets and there's a Secret Santa every year as well. There are a couple of long running Neighbours forums out there, neither of which I visit, despite having logins, but AoN is a bit less serious and more anarchic and that's its appeal - that and its longevity, I think. It does feel more 'old school' - the official Neighbours page doesn't feel like this though, and I rarely check that other than seeing the odd thing in my news feed. I wonder if groups, as much as FB has tried to remove them, had more of a sense of communality than the pages, which are, perhaps, seen as more impersonal and 'newsy'.

Adam Greenwood: On a personal level, I found an interesting area of the insight into older fans lies within football fandom. From an anecdotal perspective, I quizzed my father (a life-

long season ticket holder at WBA for over 45 years) about his use of internet based technologies and how the nature of fandom has altered in this time span. In pre-internet times, it was via discussing the team with friends in social situations, to buying the local Sports Argos paper for the latest news/transfer gossip. When the internet 'arrived' it offered my Father the chance to reclaim a sort of community that was progressively lost with age and more personal responsibilities. The mailing list formed a central part to get the latest fan views, discussions of team selections, transfers and club policies. However, he too would admit that he acted more as a 'lurker' than a contributor. Though, it was thriving list that was used by many fans across the globe and even fan-pundits and media types alike to add credibility to discussion. Interestingly, it was built up of people of similar age to himself with years of experience of watching the team, season after (bad) season. Now in his early sixties, my father has moved with the times and uses a news aggregator site and ditched the mailing list - reasons cited as being more up-to-date and sophisticated (in terms of presentation, ease of use, connectivity to other sources etc). He also remains a 'lurker' in which he unofficially follows Chris Lepowski (media super-fan pundit, and former mailing list contributor) on Twitter. Now, his enjoyment is met by following the views of a respected team insider but also his sense of community fulfilled by reading the comments and interactions between fans. Not having a Twitter account himself means he is unable to contribute but this isn't what it's about (for him at least as an older fan).

BJ: You mentioning Pinterest was interesting Ruth. I don't know many X-Files fans who use that. A lot of them use Facebook and Twitter and more are starting to use Tumblr, but I don't know many who use Pinterest. I wonder if this is to do with the technology itself or attitudes towards it within fandom (or both, of course).

RD: Both, I think. It's new, so that's probably one thing. I think Sims fans who use it like it because it can help them collect things from a wide range of sites, so if there's a particular piece of custom content they need, for example, they can pin it. Those who write fiction tend to use it more, inspiration boards, that kind of thing. It's still very much a minority technology though.

BJ: Adam mentioning football fandom also led me to wonder whether different kinds of fandoms as a whole use technology and social media differently, or whether it's largely age groups that lead to these divides. Thinking of football and The X-Files, for example, supporters of a club like Cardiff tended to get together in social situations pre-internet. When I started watching The X-Files, though, I only knew one other person who watched it. I was a fan, but I wouldn't have said I was in the fandom as such. With the advent of the internet I've found a new community rather than reclaiming one, and while my personal responsibilities have increased as I've gotten older, I'm still active in online fandom (through using Twitter, Facebook, LJ and the like).

AG: One of the key things, from working in an office dominated by over 50's, is how social media is still seen by many as 'the new'. Whilst I do not wish to over generalise, I do find that within the organisation I work for that where older users are now IT literate at a basic-intermediary level, most would admit they are at a stage where they only know enough to 'get by'. I wonder whether the same point is applicable to social media - do older users find and stay on one platform that fulfils their needs? Or are they signing up and trailing the many newer ones like Pinterest, Google+, Badoo etc. Anecdotally I've heard the fear of 'keeping up' might mean older fans continue to use no frills mailing lists and online forums...again I think this relates to age groups of fandoms and skill levels. Evaluating the question, I think 'adopt' is a key word. Many older fans will have a Facebook and Twitter account but I'm not so sure fandoms are catered for by any emerging social media sites beyond initial curiosity.

BJ: Talking about your dad, Adam, also led me to thinking about the non-participatory fans. A lot of the time in fan studies we look at participatory culture and tend to ignore the rest, but things like Twitter and Facebook also lend themselves to the (large) number of fans who lurk but don't get involved. How do we go about getting these fans included in academic debates on fan studies? They're just as important as the participatory fans, and I think this is an area that work on Twitter, etc. definitely ignores. What is it about for the fans who don't have Twitter but still follow Tweets? Or don't have Tumblr but still look up memes? There's something going on there that fulfils a need.

RD: I think there's also got to be care about how the term 'fan' is used and the fact it means different things to different people. I might say I'm a fan of Grimsby Town FC, because I feel a loyalty to them, but I only watch them play once in a blue moon and rarely even check their scores. If I watch a TV show every week does that automatically make me a fan? I follow lots of famous people on Twitter who I find interesting but would not say I was a 'fan' of their work necessarily. And I think everyone is the same - we have different levels to which we 'like' something and whether or not we'd use that word 'fan' to describe the liking. My students sometimes feel a bit divided over the term as well - being a fan still implies a level of liking something that goes 'beyond' somehow - but what is 'beyond'? Buying the box-set? Discussing something on a forum? Lots of people discuss the news or buy a particular paper every day but very few would say they were fans. Can you even be a fan of a paper, magazine, news bulletin, flavour of crisps, clothes shop etc? I think you probably can but nobody much talks in those terms about those kind of things. I know there's been some work on brand communities like Cova and Pace's article on the Nutella community and so on, but that's rather niche. Many people have a favourite product that they buy religiously but their 'fandom' doesn't extend to discussing it in a forum.

How do producers use new forms of social media to relate to their fans?

BJ: I think the definition of 'producers' is changing now so I want to look at that term a little before I answer the question itself. Historically you'd have your fans, and you'd have your producers (writers, showrunners, actors, producers, etc.) but now, particularly with the emergence of new technologies you have fans, fans who produce things on an amateur basis, 'professional' fans (for want of a better term), producers who are also fans of things, actors who are producers of other things, and so on. And I think each of these use social media in different ways and to different ends. I'm going to focus on two kinds of producers though – the producer in the way we understand it historically, and the producer who is also a fan – and I'm going to go off my own experience as a fan, as well as some of the research I've done.

For the former then, I don't really know of any producers who use Facebook to relate to their fans; I'm more aware of producers using Twitter or their own websites to connect with fans. Two examples immediately spring to mind – Frank Spotnitz (The X-Files) and Keith Duffy (Boyzone). Frank runs a production company called Big Light and when he launched the website he also set up a social network where fans could interact with each other. It contains forums, albums, 'walls' (similar to Facebook) and also allows Big Light (usually in the form of Alison Groves) to interact with fans. However, Frank also has a mail bag on the main Big Light website where he posts emails he has received from fans. Often (though not always) he will respond to those messages on the blog for other readers to see his replies. The vast majority of these messages relate to The X-Files and a lot of the fan campaign has been publicised through (and at times inspired by) the Big Light Blog. Big Light does have a Twitter account on which Frank occasionally posts (and which Alison mainly posts) and this does involve @ replies and retweets, but I'd suggest that the primary way in which Frank relates to his fans is through Big Light. Frank's use of Big Light is, however, professional. His answers to fan questions are usually short, and often refer to fellow X-Files production staff. He rarely offers personal opinions, particularly where issues around The X-Files canon or plot lines are concerned. Despite (or maybe because of?) this, fans hold Frank in high regard. He is often referred to as 'Uncle Frank' in fandom, and is by far the most accessible of the X-Files alumni.

Keith primarily relates to fans through the use of his Twitter account. He uses this not only to publicise work that he does professionally (Coronation Street, for example) but also his charity work as well as providing fans with opinions on TV shows, sporting events and personal or family events. In contrast to Frank's use of Big Light, Keith's use of Twitter is much more informal. By posting about his daily life (including photographs of himself and his family) he allows fans more intimate access to his self. He also retweets fans – sometimes in response to requests (birthdays, for example), sometimes because of what they have said about him (including Keith fan groups who have a presence on Twitter) and sometimes over a set period (e.g. I'll retweet/reply to the next fifty people who tweet me). Despite his celebrity status, Keith's use of Twitter seems to be more similar to that of

'regular' users (in contrast to, for example, his band mate Ronan Keating who tweets less often, rarely tweets personal anecdotes and rarely retweets fans). I would argue that this makes Keith a more 'regular' celebrity who is able to maintain his fan base by allowing them to see aspects of his life beyond the unattainable singer or actor on stage.

In contrast to these, fan producers who I know seem to connect with fans much more through Facebook. The myHogwarts website has Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook accounts, but my far the most used is Facebook. myHogwarts uses Facebook to provide information to fans above site maintenance and upcoming features and uses it to obtain opinions from fans on what they are looking forward to or changes which have been made. However, myHogwarts also replies to fan comments within the comments thread of individual posts, and also sets up pages for subsets of myHogwarts users. One of the best examples of this I can think of is the Professors on myHogwarts page, which was set up to facilitate discussion amongst fans planning to teach courses on the myHogwarts website. The majority of wall posts are made by fans, but myHogwarts responds to these posts as well as to other questions posed in the comment threads of these posts. myHogwarts thus uses Facebook to interact with Harry Potter fans, myHogwarts users and amateur fan producers.

AG: In my recent Facebook Page study, I found it noteworthy that the major mainstream bands (Muse and Radiohead) rarely contributed in a first person narrative - suggesting that all their social media activity was spun from their press/label teams. That said, the unsigned bands and emerging acts (Bombay Bicycle Club, Spector, Dry the River) would be keen to show their personality in their updates. They supplemented their interesting and often witty updates with images of them on the road touring, things they had eaten, seen, experienced, celebrities they met, etc . All the social media marketing books advocate such methods of using these platforms, always saying to make updates personable, interesting and relevant. Yet, I did find that it wasn't always crucial. Muse, in one week, only posted once on Facebook and it was clearly a scripted press/PR type update about. And yet it still had over 300 Comments, 5200 Likes and 240 Shares in a single day. Basically, once a band is massive, they need not do a lot - the Facebook fans will just be grateful for the contact.

With Facebook the Promote a Post tool is widely critiqued by fans and Artists alike. Facebook controls the reach of all Artist updates so it means that not all fan followers will get to see the updates - they can if they tinker with their News Feed settings, but it goes to show how the platform controls the spread of information, not necessarily the producers or the fans - but the medium itself.

My band, Low Duo, use all sorts of social media - Facebook, mine and Leigh's Twitter accounts, YouTube, LinkedIn. In some ways, these tools are essential. We are always looking to add news or something to say we're doing to these sites - like many unsigned bands at this level - the idea of being seen as 'busy' or in demand is what we deem as a crucial part of the fan building process. There was a period last year that our second EP was getting a nearly excellent review every week and it helped us to reaffirm our successes. However,

more recently, we have both done very little in terms of updates, e.g., we only updated Facebook a handful of times during the last 3-4 months because we were so busy doing other things. Last week, we played a gig, made two Facebook posts (and on Twitter). The day after the gig we got four new Facebook Likes - for us, this was fantastic (as we were getting only around 1 Like a month!). So in one way we use Facebook as some of sort measure (which I think is dangerous really as we've had plenty of plaudits outside of social media like The Guardian, Tom Robinson BBC 6Music, high profile support slots). Yet on the other hand, the recognition you receive through social media from fans is always considered highly important, however small.

But I guess I see the value of its fan building properties, but they are weaker than we are culturally led to believe - yet the knowledge to be promo-aware is more readily on our mind with social media tools being readily accessible.

BJ: I think the mainstream bands' social media use you talk about, Adam, ties into the Cliff fans' questions about whether it's Cliff doing his own social media work. I don't know if it necessarily means that first person = personal social media use and third person = press/label teams, but if that's the impression it gives to fans it would be worth asking why bands keep their first person narrative to a minimum. I like the Foo Fighters on Facebook and Dave Grohl has posted a fair bit in first person recently (as does Meatloaf, who I also like on there). While I have looked at how many likes/comments/shares that got it would be interesting to compare it to the Muse PR update. Of course, you could also argue that an update from Dave saying the band wasn't splitting up would be far better in terms of PR than a generic label press release, and I think that needs to be taken into account. I'll have to have a look through their page and find out how often the band update rather than the studio, etc.

AG: Whilst I agree with you Bethan re personal filtering, I think the fact that the social media can control post reach – which in my research was 'Facebook' –is actually a rather pivotal point. In most cases, the fans will not know they are being filtered. I think it's very damaging to smaller fandoms which are perhaps more reliant on proportionate contribution. Whilst the huge online groups/communities, such as those of major music artists on Facebook will not be too troubled by not having a wide reach (though I suspect their labels aren't so forgiving), is the negative impact on small unsigned bands. Take for example the most recent post by my band; 455 fans on Facebook, yesterday we notified fans of new photos, it 'reached' 187 people, 3 people 'liked' the post. It therefore stands that had all our fans seen the post it might well have had more likes and resultantly had more cross-promotion. Understandably this might appear quite subjective. True, the 'reach' may be through user-filtering rather than Facebook but consensus amongst bands at our level is that this is unlikely. This is demonstrable from the more popular posts we have had which can sometimes reach an audience beyond the number of fans we actually have! Having recently secured a song for the next Suicide Girls film, the cross-promotion between

our Page and theirs (they have nearly 5million fans) ensured our reach grew beyond our total fanbase. Through social media, this relationship with a new audience has given us a few more fans, more sales and feedback. Perhaps another counter-argument for the benefits of social media as a producer.

RD: TV and radio have been very quick to accommodate Twitter (at least in the UK) but it's interesting how this happens, so, for example, many programmes filter which tweets and Facebook posts they use on air (as they always did with phone calls, letters, emails etc) – and they also try to set the hashtag agenda, but if users are tagging something else, the programme eventually gives up.

RB: Ruth's comments about the UK media's uptake of Twitter hold true for North America. Even my local CBC morning show, with its older demographic, repeatedly mentions its hashtag and the host reads out listener tweets on the 'topic of the day'.

The American television industry in particular has always felt threatened by so called new media but it has never met a technology it didn't try to monetize. By the early 2000's the networks had established discussion boards and 'communities' for all their popular shows. Television without Pity was bought by Bravo Network (a subsidiary of NBC Universal) in 2007. Peer to peer filesharing via BitTorrent was countered (in the US context at least) by the establishment of Hulu and Hulu Plus. The latest 2-3 episodes of popular shows currently airing are generally available on the network website. The real payoff is not the revenue from online ads or DVD sales but rather the ratings from live viewing. Twitter serves this aim particularly well. The industry is obsessed with measuring what it calls the 'second screen' experience—watching television programming live at the time of scheduled broadcast while using a mobile device to engage with Facebook and Twitter.

How are fans responding to these producer-driven efforts to use social media?

BJ: I've noticed a couple of programmes trying to set their own hashtags – I think The Voice did it as well as X Factor. It's interesting how few Twitter users actually use the show's hashtags and keep to their own. Is it a case, do you think, that it's taken producers a while to cotton on to Twitter and so viewers have got used to their own hashtags, or is it that viewers are deliberately resisting the producers' tags (in much the same way scholars have argued that fanfic writers work)? I like how knowing their tweets/messages won't get through if they're critical doesn't stop audiences from sending them. Has there been much done on the use of Twitter or Facebook for critiquing and/or by anti-fans? As that is another interesting area.

RD: Not sure - I touched on it on my Twitter paper in 2011 but I don't know since - Rhiannon might have come across it in her work. I know with the work I'm doing with Clarissa Smith on the Fifty Shades series at the moment that this comes up, lots of people engaging in forms of anti-fandom on Facebook, blogs, Twitter, forums - making 'sarky comments', that kind of thing. But that's not necessarily the same as trying to 'subvert' hashtags or spamming comments with negative criticisms - Twitter does a lot of that on the Daily Mail website, for example, spamming up all the liberal comments with likes and down rating all the right-wing ones, or whenever they have a daft poll about something, voting up the response they know the paper doesn't want. The most recent series of *The X Factor* kept flashing up example hashtags to use, which everyone mocked – because they just use the xfactor tag. Now that's the only tag the show uses. Audiences are very cynical though, and they know their tweets/messages won't get through if they're even remotely critical – but that doesn't stop them sending critical messages – either because they suspect/hope the powers that be are listening, or because there's a pleasure in critiquing. I have a bit of a vested interest here, though, as I write for what is effectively an X-Factor anti-fan blog (although we've got more vitriolic as we went on, we used to like the show a lot more in the early days I think!) - it does seem one of those shows where anti-fandom is a huge motivator to watch - forums, blogs, Twitter, Facebook etc are full of anti-fan practices about the show. One tweeter I saw the other day said it's the show that seems to mainly be watched by people who hate it! How much the show knows this, I don't know, but I think they're cottoning on. They've tried to play to that a bit with having joke acts like Jedward, to tap into the Vote for the Worst mentality (Vote For the Worst is a long-running American Idol anti-fan site) but I think people are getting so wise to all their techniques that it's long become a parody of itself.

RB: I haven't looked at anti-fan subversion of 'official' producer use specifically but I am reminded of the creation of the #nbcfail hashtag as a response to the heavily edited, time-delayed Olympic coverage by NBC network last summer.

RD: This is slightly tangential, but there was also the example of Twitrelief in 2011 – a charity campaign to raise money for that year's Comic Relief Red Nose Day (a biannual charity telethon in the UK) and the aim was to bid on eBay for celebs to 'follow' you on Twitter – sometimes there was also a prize involved, but not always – and the backlash was huge. One of the problems people saw with this was that they see Twitter as a space which promotes everyone as 'equal' (even though I'm sure we could all argue it isn't) and that celebrities should be following you if they want to, not as a bribe – plus a celebrity following someone can be ultimately meaningless given how you can filter what comes into your stream.

In light of the above, can an argument be made that social media allows for a change in fan-producer relationships?

BJ: I think this depends on the way we are defining 'relationships' and I also wonder whether there are two sides to the story – the producer's opinion, and the fan's opinion. A producer may have hundreds or thousands of fans trying to contact him or her, while a fan will just have the one producer. Interactions with that producer from the fan point of view are thus likely to be rare, while fan interactions for the same producer might be common. I do think that with the advent of Twitter, Facebook, etc. the opportunities for fans to provide feedback and thus change the nature of a show have increased, but then there are plenty of examples from within X-Files fandom in the early days of the internet where the writers and producers changed things depending on what fans were saying on Usenet. To take another example, Keith Duffy's use of Twitter, posting photos, talking about his life, etc. enables his fans to see him as a person (although it makes no difference to the fact that he is still a celebrity and still unattainable). I wonder whether fans would be as fannish if he didn't open up aspects of his personal life to them, and I wonder how his charity fundraising would be affected if he didn't use Twitter as much, or didn't use it in the way he currently does.

On the whole I think this is a tough question to answer. The fan side of me wants to say that yes, social media is changing relationships, but the more academic side of me wonders whether this is true. I wonder whether it's more true to say that it's changing the relationship between fans (-as-consumers?) and fans-as-producers rather than fans and producers? Or if it's changing the relationship between fans and up-and-coming producers rather than fans and already-established producers?

AG: Again, I think it is true that this depends on both the technologies and the relationships - e.g. social media like YouTube enables producers to make content easily and publish this instantly to fans. I think producers whose media is copyrighted stand to benefit the most but are too cautious and risk-averse to take advantage of these barriers. In my research, I wonder whether this is because they don't wish to harbour create this level of expectancy amongst fans. Though it could easily just be an age thing - this is probably why you won't really see U2 or the Rolling Stones adding their mobile phone footage of a practice session to the site. Yet, you will see Bombay Bicycle Club uploading footage of them larking about on tour.

If I was to untangle the question fully, I would say….YES they allow for a change, but YES they do also foster an illusion. From my study, I found Facebook was used by the unsigned bands to a great extent, like my own, to build conversations with fans directly in an open and engaging fashion. The more popular the act, the less likely they have a) the time to respond to each fan b) the less inclination to value fans at an individual level - considering the swell and volume of fanbase total. I think social capital was a big discovery for me in looking at Artists on Facebook. Consider that big acts like Kasabian accumulate

something like 1000 new Likes every day it's quite staggering. But then when you realise that fandom, in a fashion described by Ruth and Bethan exists amongst sci-fi and gamers, the music fans seem non-plussed in chatting with others. One the one hand it is illusory in looking at fandom, but accurate in showing the changing nature of how fandom can be diluted with social media tools enabling more casual associations.

I know on my own personal Facebook account, I've listed Blackadder as among my favourite TV shows. So I have found it curious that the act of adding this onto my interests bracketed me as a fan and ultimately aligned me into a group and subscribed to a feed from a Page I had not chosen to follow. So even a defunct entity like this show can and still does use Facebook as a tool to drive commercial interests, generate a buzz or reaction from posting classic quotes and bind all those Facebook users with a common interest.

BJ: Fundamentally I'd agree with you Adam – they do both. But in the interest of playing devil's advocate it's always handy to take sides! I think people like Lady Gaga and Misha Collins do show how social media can change relationships between celebrities and fans. Like you say, Ruth, the stars who see the potential of social media position it as a tool to allow them to really connect with, and serve, the fandoms. Lucy Bennett has written about Gaga and notes that she posts a lot of backstage photos and really emphasises fans as the most important part of the relationship. Gaga also retweets and replies to fans a lot but there's also the other side to that where fans turn on the fan who has been 'singled out.' This is the flipside of cultural capital I guess – too much of it can make the fandom turn on you (and in many cases – like being retweeted by Gaga – through no fault of your own). That changes the relationship between fans in a negative way, while changing the relationship between the fan and the celebrity in a positive way. I think that's similar in some ways to the backlash that Twitrelief had in 2011 (I remember the campaign). Some fan reactions to a celebrity responding to another fan clearly demonstrate that Twitter isn't equal. The whole Ricky Gervais/Simon Pegg/Steven Moffatt/whoever else Twitter bullying issue falls under that as well. Having a celebrity retweet your criticism to their (very large) fanbase and encouraging that fanbase to respond to that critique is bullying, and in 'celebrity versus fan' the celebrity will come out on top in terms of numbers (though they might not come out on top in terms of their argument). I guess a lot of the research so far has looked at the positive nature of social media and fan/producer relationships but there are a lot of negative aspects to it as well.

RD: Nancy Baym looks at this a lot in her work with musicians, she's got some really fascinating stuff to say about both the benefits and drawbacks for them of the internet.

AG: I was really struck by Rhiannon's earlier point on 'second screen' and I think this is vital point of social media and how it is increasingly used. Whilst we are ever-mobile with smartphones, tablets etc, I would agree that Twitter and Facebook are also 'background' channels. When we use social media are we not also often when in other online browser

tabs/windows, watching TV or films, listening to music, in meetings (with presentations), visual based conferences – basically I think social media does not absorb our full attention but quite often acts as an outlet for our inner thoughts. I think of it similar to how the comedy Peep Show uses the narrated inner thoughts of characters Mark and Jeremy. Based on my own personal use, Twitter and Facebook is referential, social bookmarking and emotional off-loading in nature as much as it is sharing, participatory and community-focused. With regards to fandom, I think whilst is a principally about community, there is a potential shift in how and why people might identify with fandom.

RB: Mainstream network engagement with the 'second screen' was recently taken to another level by CBS with its *Hawaii Five-0* reboot. American and Canadian viewers were offered the opportunity to use the CBS website/Connect App or Twitter to vote for one of three characters who could have committed the murder in the episode 'Kapu' (14 January 2013). Voting opened shortly after the program began airing on the Eastern/Central feed and closed half an hour later. The ending involving the suspect with the most votes was then aired. To capture as many 'live' viewers as possible, CBS repeated the voting process for its Pacific/Mountain feed. All three endings were then posted to the CBS (US) and Global (Canada) websites to extend the viewing experience.

To answer the question, I deem this gesture towards fan participation in storytelling a 'one-off' attempt to gain ratings, not a fan-producer relations game changer. The three endings were in reality three takes of the same scenes with different character names and different actors in the guest role. According to one industry analyst (Proulx, 2013), 'the episode garnered average-ish Nielsen ratings and *above* average Social TV ratings'. In terms of the latter, they closely matched the Season 3 premiere. So the jury is out as to whether the network will invest resources into another similar experiment. As for my experience, I watched the episode live when I normally would PVR it to avoid the commercials. It was also 'value added' viewing given that the storyline was mediocre at best and I did get a kick out of seeing 'the boss' ending I had voted for air after the last commercial break.

To sum up, is the importance of social media in terms of both fandom and fan-producer relationships being overstated?

RD: Yes and no. For one thing it depends what we class as social media, for I'd argue that even before 'Web 2.0', there were examples of the internet being argued for as a democratising space where those relationships became a bit more interactive. Certainly when I was first looking into fan cultures in 1999 and 2000 there were examples of fan communities such as message boards and mailing lists where fans claimed the stars or their management were involved – some of which were, of course 'official' sites run by the bands – and even unofficial ones were often linked to on band websites (if they existed). O'Reilly and Doherty have some useful things to say on this in their study of New Model Army fan

communities and the negotiation over 'belonging' within an officially sanctioned space. Then there are the examples of high-profile fans who became media producers – for example, the likes of Steven Moffat, who now showruns Sherlock and Doctor Who, were posting on fan newsgroups way back when. Even before the internet there were fans who assumed some sort of 'privileged status' in terms of access to producers – you only have to look at what Camille Bacon-Smith, Henry Jenkins, John Tulloch and co were saying about fan activity in a pre-internet age to see that.

All that said, I do think there are ways in which social media 'blows it wide open' – blogs and Myspace were perhaps the earliest examples of this democratising web 2.0 idea, and YouTube and Facebook have extended that, but Twitter makes stars and media producers appear even more visible and has, I think, changed the culture somewhat, or at least changed the perception of what celebrity, social media and fandom look like in this day and age. I've read several interviews with celebrities who praise social media as giving them access to what people 'really' think – as well as those who've cursed its downsides. Just the other day I was reading an interview with Kylie Minogue, and she's always presented herself as a bit of an enigma – and she essentially still is, if you look at her Twitter, blog and Facebook, they're purely business and promo, she never lets anything slip on a personal front – but she was saying how Twitter had given her the confidence to do new things to celebrate 25 years in pop, like her 'Anti-Tour' where she performed B-sides, album tracks and rarities; and her Abbey Road album. Like Gaga, she's one of those stars who sees the potential of social media to make it seem like 'we're all in it together' and in her discourse she positions it as this tool to allow her to really connect with, and serve, the fandom.

AG: Twitter is a prime example of direct barrier-less communication (and action) between celebs and their fan-followers. When Stephen Fry retweets the latest charity org/event/needy-cause it is an example of how social media is able to generate activity and traffic in a simple, time-efficient and inexpensive way. Yet the question of whether its importance is overstated would be how many of his followers then read his retweet, go on to give to the charity, retweet it further and contribute towards it 'trending'. I know I rarely visit any of these endorsed Tweets, I'm uninterested in being told of such causes when I'm idly scrolling through for funny quotes as I often do during the ad-breaks.

BJ: I hadn't even considered this point on Stephen Fry's retweets when questioning if social media is overrated. It would be interesting to look at how many of his followers read his retweet, give to the charity, retweet it further and contribute towards it 'trending'. Neil Gaiman does something similar and has created so much traffic to the site that it subsequently crashes (which he calls a NeilWebFail). Clearly a lot of people are visiting the sites that are retweeted, but what happens after that isn't being accounted for. There's also the question, I think, of how many people would have looked at those sites/retweets if they'd come across them independently of a celebrity. I only tend to visit the sites that sound interesting, and I don't think I've ever given to charity as a result of a Neil Gaiman or

Stephen Fry link. In a similar vein it would be interesting to find out how the sponsored tweets and sponsored Facebook posts fare. I've actually clicked on a few of the sponsored tweets because they've sounded interesting, but I've never checked out a sponsored Facebook post. I wonder if it's the nature of the two sites that allows for my differing behaviour? My Twitter feed is full of people I don't really know but who post interesting things, or organisations that I follow because I'm interested in them or because they've posted things that I'm interested in. In contrast, my Facebook page is full of my friends so it's immediately obvious which the sponsored post is, and I feel annoyed that the time I'm spending catching up with my friends' news is being interrupted by what are essentially adverts.

RB: I wouldn't say that the importance of social media is overstated as much as its use is overestimated. Almost 90% of the TV 2.0 survey respondents defined themselves as fans yet less than half actually used social media for fan-related activity: 47% had 'liked' a series on Facebook. Three-quarters had never read a TV fan-related blog, and just under 65% did not use Twitter. (Since the data was collected almost two years ago, this percentage is very likely higher now.) That said, there is no doubt in my mind that social media are 'VAT''-- Value Adding Technologies' for fans. By this I mean they have the potential to deepen and extend the engagement with not only other fans but also actors, reality stars, writers and producers. With regard to Twitter, a number of participants referred to the pleasures of instant and convenient delivery of news, gossip and information but they also they spoke of a more direct connection with the actors, etc whom they follow. The chance of reciprocity, at least in relation to popular American television, is remote: only two participants described instances of a brief exchange with a favourite writer or showrunner. Just being able to reply directly, as one participant noted, was a means to express one's appreciation and a source of pleasure in itself.

RD: Not all celebrity/producer interactions are seen as genuine though – my Cliff fans are endlessly speculating about whether his blog posts and Facebook statuses are real. As they perceive the 'real' Cliff to be a technophobe, they generally don't believe he is behind them, and I know this is true for other fandoms.

AG: When I have studied Facebook Pages and how UK music bands used and maintained them, my overriding impression is that they serve commercial interests rather than any literal sense of community formation. Sure, there will be massive numbers of fans that Like an artist Page - Eminem reached 60 million this year - but it's not a reflection of the fandom per se.

When I looked to see if fans interacted with fellow fans amongst a small cross section of bands that included major, breaking and unsigned acts (such as Muse, Radiohead, Bombay Bicycle Club but also unsigned Sheffield based acts like Oblong) throughout, all of these fandoms there was practically no interest in fellow fan generated posts. For example,

Radiohead have over eight million fans/Likes yet the highest thread count I noted in a single week involved only eight people within a twenty four hour period. It shows that fans are mostly interested in band-related content rather than friend or fan bonding. It's probably more akin to a mailing list than a forum, odd considering that Facebook is culturally considered to be a sociable and engaging platform. This definitely raises questions over platform suitability in developing cohesive fanbases.

RB: I am not surprised by Adam's observations that the majority of music fans who follow bands on twitter or 'like' them on Facebook are not interested what other fans have to say. But the same was true back in the WWW days. WWW and now Web 2.0 technologies have unquestionably contributed to the spread of participatory culture but I think the visibility afforded by these technologies has led to a body of work (mine included) that has the unintended effect of over-representing the participatory fan. In the final section of my survey, I asked a series of questions about fan practices. The drop off from the more individualized practices to those involving engagement and community was steep: While almost 80% of the respondents reported accessing some form of online content or social networking site, only 37% said that they had visited a discussion forum and less than 20% said that that they participated in Live Journal and/or DreamWidth. In terms of creative practices, often associated with community, 25% and 30% read fanfic and watched fan videos respectively, with just under 14% and 4% producing fic and vids respectively. In short, it's not the importance of social media that's overstated—it's the object of our affection, participatory fandom.

BJ: A lot of the time in fan studies we look at participatory culture and tend to ignore the rest, but things like Twitter and Facebook also lend themselves to the (large) number of fans who lurk but don't get involved. How do we go about getting these fans included in academic debates on fan studies? They're just as important as the participatory fans, and I think this is an area that work on Twitter, etc. definitely ignores. What is it about for the fans who don't have Twitter but still follow Tweets? Or don't have Tumblr but still look up memes? There's something going on there that fulfils a need.

RD: Yes, this is a really good point - not sure it's something we CAN study in any depth but it does need reiterating.

AG: I agree with both Bethan and Rhiannon that within academia the notion of the participatory fan is the overriding topic of online communities. I found from my research too that regardless of the filtering mechanisms of the platform (especially Facebook) that proportionately users are more akin to 'lurkers'. As Ruth will verify, one of the real conundrums I had trying to represent this statistically. For example, in analysing 'Fan inclination to interact with artists' I found that this looked something like 0.000016 for a fan of major artist to comment on an artist update [based upon averages of 3 major artists in a

one-week period]. Whilst my analysis did not measure if it was the same or different users that responded, nonetheless it did reveal that participatory elements of social media are overstated within fandom circles. However on contradictory point I did locate a quote from Adele's record label that emphasises the 'reactive' nature of Facebook (compared to Twitter etc) which they felt was a big factor in securing more fans, and in turn, sales. The notion that relationship building via social media is a determining factor of success is therefore not so easily answered.

Concluding thoughts

One of the main points to come out of this conversation was the over-emphasis on participatory fans within academia. Both Rhiannon's survey results and Adam's Facebook interactions suggest that participatory fans count for a small percentage of the overall number of people who would consider themselves 'fans' (a term which, as we have suggested, is perhaps problematic in and of itself). It seems that we, as fan scholars, tend to overlook non-participatory fans, and this leads us to think that we do need to do more work on non-participatory fans/lurkers/whatever you want to call them.

The role of Twitter in allowing for participation between fans and producers also spills over into academia. In the course of having this conversation, Bethan saw a couple of recent articles on Twitter that were relevant to some of the things we discussed. The first of these was http://www.denverpost.com/television/ci_22178391/hashtags-tv-frustrate-viewers-but-find-favor-marketing, which looked at the use of hashtags on TV and is significant in relation to Rhiannon's point about the second screen experience. It made us wonder just where the balance is (if there actually is one) between encouraging social media use and turning viewers off using it. It's been noted above by Ruth that some viewers do utilise 'official' hashtags to tweet anti-fannish statements about a show, and we would like to see some more work done that looks at how many fans tweet using an official hashtag versus how many anti-fans do. We don't know what it might say but we think it might be interesting.

The second article was http://readwrite.com/2012/12/06/social-media-drives-album-sales?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+readwriteweb+, which looked at how social media drives album sales. This one in particular seems to gel with what Adam wrote about Adele's record label emphasising the reactive nature of Facebook. This, coupled with the filtering of posts by Facebook, makes Adam's point about a counter-argument for the benefits of social media to producers an interesting one, and would perhaps benefit from further analysis.

As we noted in the introduction to this piece, rather than come to any definite conclusions about the current state of fan studies and its future we asked questions which we felt would complicate existing assumptions about the role (and history) of social media and fan communities. We hoped that this conversation would raise questions which,

individually, we may not have thought of, and add to the debate that is taking place elsewhere in this special issue, and beyond.

Biographical Notes:

Rhiannon Bury is Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Athabasca University, Canada's Open University. She has been researching and publishing on technology, fandom, and popular television since the mid-1990s. Her book, *Cyberspaces of Their Own: Female Fandoms Online* was published by Peter Lang in 2005. Her most recent Television 2.0 project examines shifting patterns of viewing and engagement in participatory culture as a result of time-shifting, streaming and downloading technologies in a global context. Contact: rbury@athabascau.ca.

Ruth Deller is a Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University, UK. Her research interests are varied but include audiences and social media, the changing nature of internet audience communities and media representations of gender, sexuality, religion and race. She is the editor of two forthcoming journal special issues: one on the *Fifty Shades* novel series (with Sarah Harman and Bethan Jones) and one on 'rethinking makeover and transformation' (with Feona Attwood). Contact: r.a.deller@shu.ac.uk.

Adam Greenwood works within Student Services for Sheffield Hallam University. He is a recent MA graduate in Online Communication where the focus of his dissertation looked at music fandom on Facebook Pages. His study is driven by his own personal ambitions as a musician for Low Duo. Based on his own experiences of operating as a DIY music artist, he is interested in whether these online platforms offer benefits to the artists as indicated by the music and technological industries. Contact: A.Greenwood@shu.ac.uk.

Bethan Jones is a PhD candidate in the Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies at Aberystwyth University. Her thesis, which adopts Stuart Hall's model of encoding/decoding to examine how viewers engage with television fiction and its portrayal of gender, is tentatively titled 'The G Woman and the Fowl One: Fandom's Rewriting of Gender in The X-Files'. Bethan has written on a range of topics relating to gender, fandom and digital media. Her work has been published in *Participations*, *Transformative Works and Cultures* and the edited collection *The Modern Vampire and Human Identity*. She is currently co-editing a journal special issue on the Fifty Shades of Grey series. Contact: bethanvjones@hotmail.com.

Bibliography

Bacon-Smith, Camille. 1992. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Baym, Nancy K. 2007. 'The new shape of online community: The example of Swedish independent music fandom', *First Monday*, 12(8). [online] Available at http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue12_8/baym/index.html, [Accessed 26 January 2013].

Baym, Nancy K. 2012. 'Fans or friends?: Seeing social media audiences as musicians do', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 9(2), 286-316.

Bennett, Lucy. 2012. 'Fans, Celebrity and Social Media: Connectivity and engagement in Lady Gaga fandom.' Paper presented at IR13. University of Salford. October 2012.

Bury, Rhiannon. 2005. *Cyberspaces of Their Own.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Bury, Rhiannon. 2012. 'Tweet, Tweet, Who's There?: Television Fan Use of Twitter.' Paper presented at IR13. University of Salford. October 2012.

Chin, Bertha. 2010. *From Textual Poachers to Textual Gifters: Exploring Fan Community and Celebrity in the Field of Fan Cultural Production*. Ph.D. Cardiff University.

Cova, Bernard and Stefano Pace. 2006 'Brand community of convenience products: new forms of customer empowerment – the case "my Nutella The Community"'. *European Journal of Marketing*, 40 (9-10), 1087 – 1105.

Deller, Ruth. 2011. 'Twittering on: Audience research and participation using Twitter', *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 8(1), 217-245.

Deller, Ruth, and Clarissa Smith. (Forthcoming) 'Reading the BDSM Romance: Reader Responses to *Fifty Shades*'.

Jenkins, Henry, 1992. *Textual Poachers: Television, Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Jenkins, Henry. 2007. 'When Fan Boys and Fan Girls Meet…' *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*. [online] Available at http://henryjenkins.org/2007/05/when_fan_boys_and_fan_girls_me.html. [Accessed 26 January 2013]

Jones, Bethan. 2012. 'myHogwarts: A new Kind of Social Media?' Paper presented at IR13. University of Salford. October 2012.

O'Reilly, Daragh and Kathy Doherty. 2006. 'Music B(r)ands Online and Constructing Community: The Case of New Model Army' in Michael D. Ayers (ed.) *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 137-160.

Proux, Mike. 2013. 'Last Night's Hawaii Five-0 Social TV Stunt.' [weblog] Available at http://www.hhcc.com/blog/last-nights-hawaii-five-0-social-tv-stunt. [Accessed 28 January 2013]

Tulloch, John and Henry Jenkins. 1995. *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek.* London: Routledge.