DIGITAL PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND THE TV AUDIENCE

EVERYONE'S A CRITIC

SANDRA M. FALERO

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Everyone's a Critic

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Introduction: Democratizing Criticism

This is a book about the community of television viewers and critics at *Television Without Pity.com*. *Television Without Pity* was a site devoted to recapping television programs. "Recaps" were humorous recapitulations of popular programs, in long form. Partly television criticism, partly entertainment, recaps engendered discussion, and message boards were provided for readers to continue the criticism alongside the recapper. It is also a book about the changing nature of amateur television criticism in the digital age. Audiences have become a central component in the study of contemporary media. Today, reading or writing an online review of a television show is a relatively normal activity. But, not long ago, the image of a denizen of a TV message board was a sad caricature: a lonely, overweight shut-in whose only thrill in life was in lashing out at Hollywood's creative elite from behind the protective anonymity of a keyboard.

Why should we care about the faceless commenters out there, chatting about television shows with an intensity former generations would have reserved for biblical texts or political speeches? Among the sycophants and trolls (and even within them) are everyday people with office jobs, or service-industry jobs. Maybe their co-workers are simply not watching *Mad Men*. Perhaps there is no water cooler to discuss it over, or there are rules about how long they can stand at the water cooler gossiping about television. For a myriad of reasons, people have gone online in droves to discuss their favorite television stories. And as they did so, I studied them.

I should probably say "as we did so," and make it clear that I studied "us." I'm one of these creatures, and I am old enough to remember

when Internet fans were talked about in mainstream US culture in terms that compared us to base life forms. Audiences, or "viewers" to use a less commodified term, have been attempting to take over the reigns of entertainment criticism on a large scale since the early 2000s. Is it changing television? Is it changing audiences? Is it changing creators? The answer is a resounding yes.

I entered this study not only because I wanted to document the phenomenon I was participating in, but also because so much of the early discussion of it focused on technology. Technology had afforded us (on the negative end of the spectrum) the evils of the Internet troll; proof that society was devolving and that criticism as an art form would give way to the uneducated whims of the infantilized masses. Arguments about popular media and cultural decline are peppered with this idea, that the "trash media" we consume is destroying us and leading to a nation of unintelligent brutes who do not value intelligence or the pursuit of knowledge. The popular 2006 film *Idiocracy* brought these fears to life. The film takes place in a future in which anti-intellectualism prevails in a nation that has become a mass of unintelligent brutes.

According to cultural critic George Will, we are becoming "an increasingly infantilized society," obsessed with new technology, but not progressing in intellect. Indeed all that technology has afforded us is a "more sophisticated delivery of stupidity."[1] He was not alone in that rather negative view of technology, especially media technology, in American culture. From Marshal MacLuhan's *Understanding Media* to Neil Postman's seminal work *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in the 1980s, to Nicholas Carr's *New York Times* 2010 bestseller *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, the idea of technology's relationship to intellect's perceived slow decline has been widely discussed.

In stark contrast to the neo-Luddites, there is the more positive side; that technology has provided us with a closer connection between the creators of media stories and their audience, allowing for stories that matter, a revision of the idea of audiences as solely the numerical approximations of the box office and Nielsen Media Research. What was sorely needed, I thought, was a better look at the connection between technology, history, and culture. I wanted to show that audiences have a long history of being just as loud and brash (and derided) as Internet commenters today, but also that the role of technology is an important component in how we make sense of the new kind of relationship between creators, critics, and audiences.

My primary evidence is conversation. I spent over a decade reading the conversations between members in the thousands of message boards once thriving at *TelevisionWithoutPity.com*. I conducted interviews and surveys with writers, message board members, and the founders of the site. I read thousands of pages of conversations, and even participated in a few.

In the beginning, this study posed a lot of questions about the future of television, audiences, and those who study both. I debated what would work best for a study that seemed to be very new to the field. This was not a typical fan community (most did not even define themselves as such), nor was it a cross section of "average" viewers, at least not in any discernable way. My methodology and research questions were honed and some even changed over the years. I watched, over a decade, as the community I was a part of started to change in ways I had not anticipated. A site I visited every day for many years became less and less a place where I could find like-minded critics of television. Its eventual takeover by a major television network turned it into something different, something I became less invested in as a member. However, the work done there and the ways it contributed to my understanding of how people watch and think about television still manages to engage me years after its closure. Though it would be risky to think of this site as representative of other Internet communities, I think there is some value in connecting what happened at *Television Without Pity* to the considerable cultural changes that have taken place as a result of (at least in part) the proliferation of Internet communication. Critical communities consisting of fans, anti-fans, and those in between, are now popular across the varied social media platforms.

My central research question focused on what audiences were *doing to* television via the web. When I realized how connected the site was to television authors, I wondered what kind of impact *Television Without Pity* had on television programs. A closer look at the workings of the site and the rapidly changing technology over the course of the past decade required me to broaden my approach. This project eventually came to be about how the members of *Television Without Pity* played a role in a cultural shift in the way we think about authorship, criticism, and audience.

I went about answering that initial research question with a variety of methods. Few works on web communities or television audiences make connections to audiences of the distant past. I wanted to trace the history of audiences, to understand how individuals connected with entertainment before the industrialization and professionalization of media. To do this I examined historical literature on crowds, audiences, and performance

from seventeenth-century Europe to the early days of American television. I examined the theories of scholars throughout those periods whose works focused on audience and entertainment in culture. As an aca-fan, I also relied on theories of fan culture.

The Collision of Old and New Media Forms

This shift away from discrete roles for author, critic, and audience is at the crux of the debate in this book. It is a debate that happened between television auteurs like Aaron Sorkin, critics like John Haberski, and audiences like many of those who posted at *Television Without Pity*. It is a shift aided by interactive forms of technology. This shift is not just about television, it is happening across the media spectrum. In September 2004, author Anne Rice joined the heated discussion on *Amazon.com*'s reviewer section of *Blood Canticle*, her latest installment in the popular Vampire Chronicle novel series she began in 1976. "Joined the discussion" is perhaps not as appropriate as "lectured her readers." Her post's underlying themes illustrate the great divide between author and audience, but also the intimate connection between them. She accused the authors of the negative reviews of stupidity, arrogance, and tantamount to slander. She also explained that their input was not needed, since her work was in no way collaborative.[2]

There was a bit of discussion over whether the poster was truly Rice, but it was soon quelled when she discussed it on her own website and repeated her offer of a refund for unhappy readers. Not every author has been prepared for the blurring of lines that occurs as audiences find their way to critical spaces on the web. As will be established in the following chapters, critics have a place, authors have a place, and many authors are quite content with audiences observing *their* place. The audience has, in many ways, been filtered for authors for over a century. Through demographic analyses, polls, questionnaires, letters, and careful managers, an author could avoid most of the sentiment that Rice found on the *Amazon.com* reviews. The Internet has provided access in ways authors such as Rice least expected. All of the sudden, audiences, it seemed, felt that they were competent critics. This shift could possibly have happened over a long period of time via book clubs and other forms of social connection related to media, but the Internet created the equivalent of thousands of vast spaces for people to meet on terms that did not have to comply with the previous rules governing amateur critical spaces such as fan conventions,

literature conventions, or book clubs. The reviewers on *Amazon* show that this is a phenomenon not just related to television audiences.

Jim Collins' *Bring on the Books for Everybody* chronicles the shift in reading culture. He argues that reading (much like other forms of storytelling such as television and film) is no longer solitary, but a social experience. But why did this shift occur? At a time of excessive conglomeration and control over media products, this seemingly grassroots effort at participatory culture increased. According to Collins,

> [The] self-confidence enjoyed by amateur readers could only have occurred during a time when there was a profound loss of faith in professional readers, a loss of confidence in traditional literary authority to say much of anything useful about the joys of reading.[3]

"Professional readers" being in this case literary critics and the intellectual community. How did readers lose faith in critics? It shows a similar path taken by films and television. As criticism became further and further professionalized, critics and intellectuals set discernable and, in many ways, impenetrable boundaries between them and the reading public. They developed a jargon that made it difficult for everyday readers to enter into discussion. This closed off readers from the culturally sanctioned critical discussion.

> This combination of sanctioned sites and appropriate manners of speaking, which had to be learned before one could enter into the sacred conversation, was, in Foucauldian terms, a discursive formation, because it set both the limits and the modalities needed to distinguish between informed and uninformed ways of talking about an aesthetic experience.[4]

This was about having the appropriate tools to understand a work of literature appropriately, but it was also about, "refinement of a certain class of readers who observed the protocols of appreciation, protocols unnecessary for the enjoyment of popular fiction." Ultimately, "that sacred literary conversation then, was founded on a restriction of access, even as it was seemingly offered to all comers like the masterpieces in the public museum."[5]

As a result, readers developed their own ways of categorizing and analyzing works, making their own personal investment in the story a major facet of their discussions with other readers. When web technology made

these conversations visible (via spaces like message boards and Amazon reviews), it disrupted, or at least brought to light the disruption of, the cultural hierarchy of author-critic-reader. According to Collins, "once there were authors and readers and official critics who were sanctioned to make the right choices for you," but now such authority is no longer trusted or needed by readers to understand what makes a good work of fiction.[6] Online reader-critics respond to a finished work (with perhaps the exception of a book series) and one author.

This shift is not something I conceived of as important at the outset of my study, but it came to be what drove me to understand why Internet critics were demeaned and ridiculed at the same time that they were called the "future" of interactive media. Television viewers have a multitude of authors and episodes to contend with, and much less in the way of an entrenched highbrow organization of critics, but the idea of the viewer-critic is certainly something I saw in *Television Without Pity*'s glowing message boards. The idea that viewers who love a program might have deep discussions about it, some that are highly critical, has always been a cornerstone of fan culture.

I have been part of fan cultures since I was a teen. I went to fan conventions, bought 'zines, wore lapel buttons, met up with like-minded folks to talk about episodes of *Xena* or *Star Trek: the Next Generation*. When I entered *Television Without Pity*, I felt that it was a lot like a fan community, but not what I thought of as a traditional "fan" space. I saw it as a world of amateur critics more than fans. The earliest years of my membership at the site coincided with my academic education on fan culture.

Fan studies since the 1980s have been important to the cultural studies approach to audience research. In earlier incarnations of this work, I engaged the Marxist critiques of the media industry by the Frankfurt School theorists, particularly Theodor Adorno, but was more convinced (albeit cautiously) of the active, engaged audience Henry Jenkins discussed in *Textual Poachers*. When I began thinking about relationships of power, fan culture, and popular media as a graduate student in 1999, Adorno and Jenkins were the heavyweights in the theoretical discourse surrounding audience agency. Like most scholarship since *Textual Poachers*, I exist in some sort of space in between, exploring power and audiences in a contemporary global marketplace.

The nature of the audience is the central question in fan studies, and in understanding producer–audience relationships. Adorno and Jenkins seem to be at two ends of a spectrum; one denied audience agency, while the

other championed radical, resistant, even scandalous media fans. Adorno's audience seemed to resemble a teeming mass of oppressed dupes of popular culture. His 1963 article, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," infantilized the audience, and discussed the ways in which they were caught up in short-term pleasures at the expense their own freedom.[7] Adorno seemed to deny any authentic individuality or creativity to the audience, viewing them as passive receptacles for ideology. His theory may have something to do with his method, which does not seek out actual fans or media consumers but relies primarily on accounts in newspapers, newsreels of movie fans and Beatles fans, as well as letters to editors of fan magazines.[8]

Jenkins, who himself was part of multiple fan communities when he wrote his 1992 ethnography of fan culture, argued that fans are "active producers and manipulators of meanings."[9] The fans in Jenkins' study were not just analyzing aspects of their programs they were active creators of cultural goods. They wrote fiction pieces that allowed them to play with commercial texts, and came together at conventions to perform songs, discuss the text with producers, and create complex social relationships built around their fascination with the media product. Social problems and constructions of race, class, and gender are discussed by Jenkins' fans, some who struggle to assert dominance over the text itself by rewriting it to fit their denied, marginalized perspectives. Contemporary critics of Jenkins have argued that fans are a relatively small community and that their resistant practices are not representative of the larger community of media consumers, but this criticism needs re-examination as the practices of fan communities have, in the digital age, become more mainstream.

Among many scholars working in fan culture studies after Jenkins' seminal work, *Textual Poachers* was published, Matt Hills best represents the space in between Adorno and Jenkins. Adorno's work may have denied any activity to the viewing experience, but according to Hills, Jenkins' early work granted too much agency to fan practices. He has suggested that any academic approach to fandom which favors total passivity or rebellious resistance will "inevitable falsify the fan experience." [10] Hills acknowledged the duality inherent in fan consumption of media products in his book *Fan Cultures.* In his chapter "Between Consumerism and Resistance," he argues that fan experiences are highly contradictory. Though he believes fan activities are often meaningful and can be sites of dialogue, he is hesitant to grant them the celebratory status of Jenkins and other fan scholars. Hills acknowledges the work of both Adorno and Jenkins when he writes,

> The work of Theodor Adorno has been greatly simplified in cultural studies' accounts, which have sought to value and celebrate the activities of fans. However, it is not my intention to return to the idea of the fan as "cultural dupe." Instead, I aim to place fan cultures squarely within the processes and mechanisms of consumer culture, given that fans are always already consumers.[11]

He further complicates the concept of resistance by arguing that resistant practices are constantly being appropriated by the media industry, which likes to build "niche markets." Given that *Television Without Pity* was eventually purchased by NBCUniversal, this perspective is very useful in exploring the complexity of "agency" in any discussion of media audiences.

Fan culture has changed as a result of the proliferation of Internet usage, but in many ways the central elements of fandom remain: emotional investment in fictional characters, meeting other fans at conventions, writing fan fiction, group viewings, examining and re-examining pop culture texts. If anything, the Internet has made these activities more accessible to those who would never have known such subcultures existed. People who would not have called themselves "fans" participated in many of the fannish behaviors listed above at *Television Without Pity*. That they did not see themselves as part of fandom (indeed, some saw themselves diametrically opposed to fandom) is an indication that these interactive practices once the domain of fans have become somewhat normalized. Fan studies, as I discuss more in depth in subsequent chapters, was as relevant to this work as audience studies.

Television Without Pity was definitely a participatory culture, but there were important elements of the site's structure and policies that kept it from becoming a truly democratic community. The site eventually became incorporated into the media industry rather than acting as a thorn in its side. *Television Without Pity* allowed viewers access to TV creators (and vice versa) in a potentially significant way, but television, as a corporate sponsored system, can never allow audience desires and needs to be fully met. Radical changes will only be absorbed by corporate television when they are thought of as marketable and thus cease to be radical. More often than not, television programming tends to reinforce the status quo, offering the idea of political change in the form of financial contribution to charities or individual acts of giving. Rarely do we see programming that encourages protests, reclaiming public space from advertisers, or confronting government institutions. It is unsurprising that a web community

managed by a television corporation would encourage, much less allow such spaces for discussion. However, the site did allow a space for discussion (in the context of television programs) of ideas and issues, some of which can be thought of as quite radical, under the guise of "just" discussing television shows. These conversations were happening more often in the early years of the site's success, and slowed to a crawl after the purchase by Bravo, a subsidiary of NBCUniversal.

At *Television Without Pity*, one could have found a virtual army of cultural critics ready to explain and question how television programs are reinforcing or challenging cultural norms. But ultimately, the community was not given a supportive space to conceptualize any sort of democratization of media that would allow for the more complex stories they often craved. Its absorption by a major television network was further indication that this once potentially radical space has become more fully incorporated into the rhythms of corporate media. I found myself fascinated by the connections this community made with one another, teaching each other different ways of interpreting and deconstructing popular culture narratives, sharing knowledge and demonstrating their desire for a better, more participatory form of entertainment. Envisioning a different kind of television and working to make it happen is the next step, perhaps even the purpose of criticism.

As with any cultural group, its workings and meanings were much larger than any one ethnographer could lay bare. My goal was to hone down thousands of pages of discussion into a narrative that explored what made this site culturally important. This was more than just a dumping ground for bad reviews of television shows. Its members challenged the hierarchy of creator–critic–audience, and that challenge resonated with both the members themselves and the industry as a whole. *TWoP*pers were not just consumers, they were producers. They produced critiques and circulated knowledge. They rejected the official or sanctioned interpretations of television narratives. They took television creators to task and became the benchmark for a smart, discerning viewership. The site offered an excellent case study for the participatory audience in the Internet age, an age in which fannish rituals and practices were mainstreamed, and water-cooler talk took on epic proportions.

The following chapters explore a lot of spaces within *Television Without Pity* and connect the work done in those spaces with cultural shifts that resulted from the steady increase in digital communication. From 2000 when the site was operating as *Mighty Big TV*, to the shutdown of the

site in 2014, this work is situated precisely during the time that television went from the cable era to the post-network era. Each chapter is named after popular message boards at *Television Without Pity*. The site's boards often had clever names, some created by the founders, others by members themselves.

In Chap. 1, I introduce the site and its members, making the case that it was the largest and most comprehensive space online for the criticism of television. The site was like no other before or since; its popularity and size was massive and grew quickly. I argue it grew because of the design, its moderation policies, community building, and its independence from networks. Its size made it difficult to study as an artifact, and my own participation there made me realize it was much more useful to study it as a culture. I close the chapter by discussing how I had to rethink traditional ethnographic models in order to do the community justice.

In Chap. 2, I discuss the factors that led to a change in the way groups of audiences were perceived by cultural critics and members of the elite, creating an idea about audiences as passive, and about popular media as simplistic and unworthy of real critical analysis. I connect this seemingly very new model of audience-creator interaction via the Internet with a few older models that date back to the sixteenth century, namely theater audiences and the development of the concept of "audience sovereignty."

In Chap. 3, I look at the more friendly relationships at *Television Without Pity* and how they fostered community. This chapter explores message boards where members and the creators of their favorite programs had rapport and connected despite the critical nature of the site. These discussions resulted in what some members regarded as positive changes in their television programs. In particular I discuss the *Smallville* message boards, and their continued quest to get more screen time and a better story arc for African-American actor Sam Jones III, who played Clark Kent's best friend, Pete Ross. I also explore the ways members created community spaces where they could talk about their everyday lives, as well as real world events like *TWoP* Conventions or group viewing activities.

In Chap. 4, I discuss ways the community at *Television Without Pity* has taken part in redefining authorship in the digital age. I explore the different dialogues on the site between community members as well as television industry insiders that touch upon ideas of power, control, and corporate influence. This chapter focuses on some of the heated arguments between

those who have power in the television industry, and those on the site who attempt to assert some kind of cultural power via online discussion. In discussing the notion of authorship, I also explore the dynamics between authors and critics and the role critics have played in popular media. This leads to an argument over whether communities like *Television Without Pity* are "democratizing" criticism, and explores the cultural impact of such a phenomenon.

In Chap. 5, I discuss the dark side of online criticism. The ways that *Television Without Pity* fostered and encouraged what has been called "anti-fan" or "fan-tagonist" behavior. The site's motto, "spare the rod, spoil the network," was taken up by many members. These very critical viewers were part of the emergence of "hate watching" a program, that is, viewing for the purpose of harsh, unrelenting criticism. In this chapter I discuss the ritual of "hate watching" and how the ensuing discussion online surprised many television industry insiders who explored the message boards looking for fans. Reality television programs in particular allowed for a complex critical environment, where members sometimes hurled personal insults at television program cast members and then had to deal with the fallout when some of them later joined the discussion. A few instances of that "calling out" led to an important discussion about reality storylines, and created a space for empathy.

In Chap. 6, I discuss the many ways the community at *Television Without Pity* was "managed" by discussion moderators, site-wide policies, and the corporations that eventually came to own the site. The technology that the site used, and the management of infractions through it, created real limitations on discussion, particularly political talk.

In Chap. 7, I discuss the factors that led to the eventual demise of *Television Without Pity*. Years after my project's completion, the site's owner (network giant NBCUniversal) decided to stop posting updates to program recaps and blogs. They also shut down the message boards and removed access to them through the site. Its size is partly to blame, but also the things that made it attractive at the outset were no longer there: design, moderation style, community-building efforts. It's memorialization by journalists and bloggers after NBCUniversal announced its death indicate that it was indeed a one-of-a-kind space where criticism, though harsh, flowed from audiences to authors, and created a supportive space for discussing the role television played in American culture.

My conclusion discusses the limitations of the study, how members perceived its impact, as well as what we can learn from *Television Without Pity*.

Television Without Pity was one place where discussing television programs online became normalized, where fan practices were mainstreamed, and led invariably to the world of live-Tweeting season finales, hilarious blog recaps, and not-so-guilty guilty TV pleasures.

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Notes

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CHAPTER 1

"Meet Market": The Attraction of a Place Without Pity

Early on in my study I noticed that some members already had an idea that the *TWoP* community had the potential to be very powerful in terms of television's history. "I'm so happy to be part of the *TWoP* community," one member wrote, "we may end up making television better whether we want to or not." What was it that drew so many people to this little corner of the web? Some cynics would argue that negativity is bound to flourish in any new space on the web, but much more than a shared dislike of television programs brought viewers and kept them there. This was no small fan site. *Television Without Pity* was a very large web community, and its size was directly related to the welcoming culture created by the founding members. A great discussion topic can bring a lot of people to a message board, but a well-designed and managed message board keeps them there. The writers employed by the site to recap episodes were engaging, and the site's design was easy on the eyes. It was the message boards, however, that brought the real traffic, sometimes millions of page views in a month. The site founders played excellent hosts and understood that to keep the discussion relevant and interesting, attention to rules and forum design was key. Creating and maintaining great conversation took some doing, and was not always successful. A powerful combination of site design, discussion moderation, and community building kept the membership growing from its early incarnation in 1999 until the final message board post in May 2014. However, what drew many in and outside of the Hollywood elite was likely its independence from any particular fandom. In the pages ahead, I discuss

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the size and nature of the site, how it was able to build a community, and how I, as an ethnographer, went about studying the site. The sheer size and nature of the site was powerfully new, and required rethinking of traditional ethnographic models. How this group of people used the Internet to make meaning from television and create a sense of community is important for understanding the changing nature of the television audience.

The Birth of *Television Without Pity*

Television Without Pity was a website that went through many incarnations and overhauls. Started by web entrepreneurs Tara Ariano, Sarah Bunting, and David T. Cole (also known as Wing Chun, Sars, and Glark on the boards), it began in 1998 as *DawsonsWrap.com* and was devoted exclusively to the WB series *Dawson's Creek*. Bunting and Ariano (both English literature majors at Princeton and University of Toronto, respectively) had been avid posters on a message board forum all about *Beverly Hill, 90210* and when they started to watch *Dawson's Creek*, Cole suggested they create a space online to write about the show. As its popularity increased, so did its purview, expanding to the recapping and discussion of other shows, and via a name change became *MightyBigTV.com*. According to Cole, their first site was more of a labor of love than a business idea, "When we did *Dawson's* it was just for fun, and we saw something there. We had so many friends that were good writers and put two and two together." What later became a huge community of users and a large platform for writers was not on the radar in 1999 when the first site was conceived: "It wasn't like we were setting out to do it, you didn't make sites like that back then. Everyone was on Geocities, doing home pages," said Cole. The trio started conceiving the site as a kind of television program, "kind of like a *Daily Show* for television, before *Talk Soup* was created." They went to Los Angeles to pitch the idea. In doing the legwork for a television property, they realized that Coca-Cola owned a trademark for "Big TV." Fearing the legal ramifications of moving forward with a similar name, the site underwent a name change to its final moniker, *Television Without Pity* in 1999, or "*TWoP*" in the acronym-loving parlance of the Internet.[1]

Their mission, according to co-founder Sarah Bunting, was to hold networks and writers accountable by analyzing their work and "not just passively sitting around and watching."[2] The impetus for the site and its community is criticism, as is evidenced by the site motto, which boldly declared, "Spare the Rod, Spoil the Networks." Its history is a rocky one, with various attempts to keep the site afloat and pay their writers. Initial

attempts to secure advertising on the site were not successful, according to Cole, even after joining with Yahoo's advertising arm in 2002:

> First, we wanted to cover costs, and at the start, we did. And when everything crashed in the early aughts, we stumbled hand-to-mouth for like six or seven years. And then, one weird month we got calls from all these places. We never *tried* to sell the site. I don't know whether there was an industry report going around, saying "TV sites are going to be the new hot thing." *Jump the Shark* and *Buddyhead* got bought at the same time. We had five places in the span of a month offering us money. And we were excited because we had hoped that by selling we could do bigger and better things, like video content, a version of the TV show we pitched.[3]

That year was 2006, and by 2007, the site underwent an overhaul when its founders finally sold the site. It was transferred into the hands of Bravo, a television channel owned by network giant NBCUniversal. A year into the Bravo ownership, the founders of the site quit. Five years later, in 2013, Bravo announced that it was shutting down operations and no longer hosting the message boards. Visitors can no longer read the dynamic conversations that took place there.

When I first joined the site as a member in 2000, it was actively recapping about 35 different television programs, and had message boards for each one. At the height of the study in 2007, the site employed many more writers and there were about 55 programs recapped on a regular basis. Because users could create their own topics (within a few basic parameters), the message boards grew. There were message boards for programs that had been cancelled as well as programs the site did not officially recap, such as sitcoms and cartoons. It grew to become one of the top five most popular television websites on the Internet, eventually generating over 70 million page views a month. The founders claimed to have over 1.5 million unique viewers when they sold to Bravo.[4] By the time I had completed my survey of the site in 2010, it boasted 1,849,888 individual posts in the message boards (see Fig. 1.1). There were 25,309 topics on the site and both of those numbers were a result of a steady climb over the course of the study. In my interview with site founder David T. Cole, he recalled that there were over 200,000 members registered to use the message boards when they sold the site in 2007.

Users had designated titles based on how many times they posted in the message boards. Table 1.1 indicates that user hierarchy.

In addition to these monikers, there were designations for site staff (Network Executives) and moderators (*TWoP* Moderators), as well as the site administrators (Head of Programming). Over 100,000 members of the

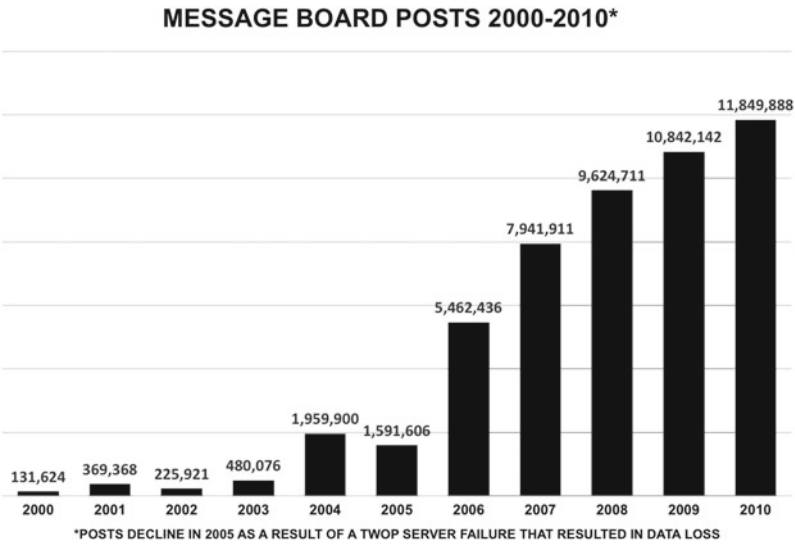

Fig. 1.1 Total posts in all message boards

Table 1.1 User designations

Number of posts	*Site designation*
0–9 posts	Just tuned in
10–99 posts	Channel surfer
100–199 posts	Loyal viewer
200–349 posts	Video archivist
350–999 posts	Couch potato
1000–4999	Fanatic
5000+	Stalker

site qualified as "fanatics" or members with over 1000 posts to their usernames. Most posters in the forums I studied during my project were coded as "Fanatics," and all interviewees had made at least 100 posts. There were also many "Just Tuned In" members, who began to post at the start of each new season. The designations were a way of creating a hierarchy so that when new members join a discussion, they were shepherded into the norms of the boards by more experienced members. The designations

did not, however, indicate how long a person had been a member. For instance, one of my survey respondents listed as "Just Tuned In" indicated that they had been "lurking" (viewing discussion, but never entering it) for years. Just because they had not logged as many posts did not mean they did not know the intricacies of the site or the boards.

The number of users grew alongside the number of topics. During the study, 158 television programs comprised the major topics of discussion between 2000 and 2010, each program having subtopics. Some of the more popular programs, such as *Lost*, had more than 400 topics alone (see Fig. 1.2). There were also hundreds of general topics for discussion such as commercials, gender, race, and censorship.

By the time the site had left behind the name *Mighty Big TV* and emerged as *Television Without Pity*, it was vast in terms of both number of users and breadth of topics. A clear and simple design strategy made the site easy to navigate and understand, even for the newest users.

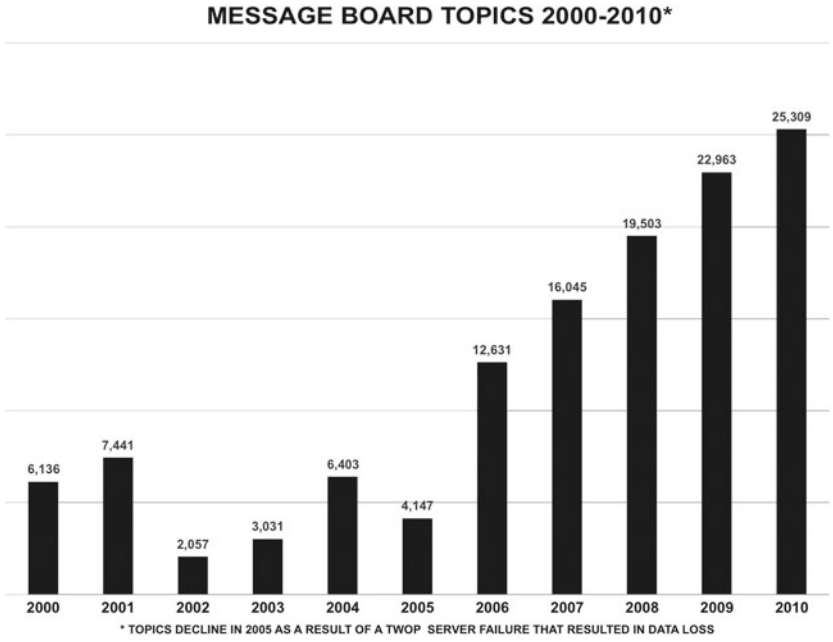

Fig. 1.2 Total topics in all message boards

Key Aspects of the Site's Design

The social hierarchy, as well as the look and feel of the message boards, was about simplicity and clarity. The site kept members coming back by creating an atmosphere of "easy conversation," though a labyrinth of rules and careful design lay beneath the simple flow seen on the surface. The message boards were well organized and easy to read, even though the most popular boards sometimes logged thousands of posts each day. The topics were categorized and color-coded. Each forum in the message boards had topics that ranged from very specific to very general. Some were for one episode only, while others were devoted to discussing the story arcs of an entire season.

Message board posts were formatted in a consistent, simple pattern. The format was stripped of the pictures, avatars, favorite quotes and signatures that were common on many other online message boards. The lack of these personal accessories created what appeared to be an uninterrupted flow of discussion, something the founders seemed to prize. When I asked founder David T. Cole about his design strategy, he said that he used Invision Power software to create the boards, but he modified it considerably: "I went in and rebuilt it, made it a lot cleaner, easier to navigate." His goal was to strip it of things he felt were cluttering up the landscape in order to focus on ease of use and to service the conversation. Cole said, "whatever we did design-wise was just to highlight the content. That usually makes things easier to navigate."[5] His approach was to focus on user experience, and guided design with that in mind. Figure 1.3 provides an example of the format of a message board post at *TWoP*.

The user's profile and email address were available to the right of the member name (if she or he had elected to make that information public). From this post, a reader could tell that this member had logged in at least

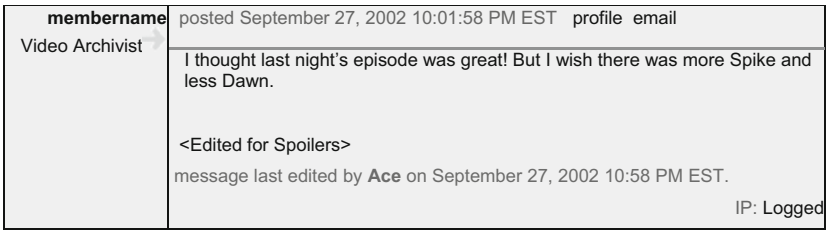

Fig. 1.3 Example post

200 posts in his or her time as a member from the "Video Archivist" title. Without elements like signatures and emoticons or other images, it allowed the message boards to mimic real world conversation better. The flow of discussion went from one post to the next with minimal disruption, and even quoting a previous post did not detract from the overall calm tone of the design.

The Moderator's Heavy Hand

Moderators vigilantly monitored the message boards, enforcing rules of polite conversation. Instructional guides (FAQ's, "Frequently Asked Questions") instructed posters to refrain from stating their opinions as fact, encouraged them to read the boards thoroughly before posting new comments, asked that they try to use proper grammar and spelling, keep arguments polite, and stay on topic. If a poster derailed discussion or became overly confrontational, they were given several warnings and eventually banned from posting on the site.

The policies for the *Television Without Pity* message boards were complicated, and each message board has its own set of FAQs. While these policies were intended to keep the site running smoothly and keep conversation polite, they were also likely holdovers from the early days of the site, when bandwidth conservation was paramount. The conversations in the message boards were thus not completely free flowing, but rather adhered to a hierarchical system that required the moderators to determine relevant discourse. Going off topic, being impolite, ignoring proper spelling and grammar were all discouraged on the site's message boards.

The FAQ's for both the *Buffy* and *Smallville* boards, for instance, were intended to ensure that the message board was a safe and welcoming environment for the community of posters. The *Smallville* FAQ announced:

> With as many posters as we have here, we often disagree. It's okay to state your opinion and back it up as part of the discussion, as long as it's done respectfully. Personally attacking and/or flaming other posters is not tolerated. If you have an issue with another poster, take it to email!

Sarah Bunting insisted that the extensive rules were what made the community so welcoming: "We try to hold our posters to a high standard. We're trying to create an atmosphere that's polite and respectful—well, not necessarily toward the shows…."[6] She also mentioned that

she did not tolerate hate speech or soliciting. One of my interviewees mentioned that the moderation policies were welcoming: "You don't get the usual assholes saying stuff like 'Buffy's tits look great!'" Omar G's *Smallville* boards did not even allow foul language unless the words were in "spoiler brackets," an html code which made the text appear invisible until highlighted.

Though creating a welcoming environment was important, in order to keep the conversation polite site administrators displayed little sympathy for those who knowingly broke the rules. Often moderators had no mercy—deleting and editing posts, or just banning the offender from posting on the message boards altogether. Most reprimands (or, as they liked to call them, "sporkings") consisted of the oft repeated "don't state your opinions as fact," or "get back on topic." When the site was eventually purchased by Bravo, a new team of moderators was hired, the site's membership grew tremendously, and a result, these rules grew in scope. The punishments for breaking rules became more heavy handed.[7]

There was also a policy of not "discussing the boards on the boards." In other words, if there were any problems with the way moderators were handling discussion, or problems with a perceived bias within one of the board topics, these were not up for discussion within the topics themselves. There were places where members could lodge complaints and ask questions about the finer points of policies, and users were also encouraged to email moderators or administrators. The "boards on the boards" rule was essentially one that attempted to keep discussion about the topic at hand and to maintain the authority of moderators.

Exceptions to the aforementioned policy were the "Meet Markets," which were message board topics that were within every television program topic. These were informal places where members could introduce themselves and forge connections in different ways. Though many of the members of the site traversed a variety of different television program topics, each topic had its own sense of community and set of regulars. The *Smallville* boards had a different kind of group dynamic than the *West Wing* boards, for instance. *Smallville*'s community was very tight knit, with slang and acronyms that required FAQ all of their own. The boards for the program *The Amazing Race* had many visitors from cast members of the program. Each one had an informal gathering spot in the Meet Markets where members talked about their personal problems, cheered each other up, traded jokes and recipes. Ease of use, an easy to understand format for posting that attempts to mimic face-to-face conversation,

a system of rules for keeping topics in focus, and a space for personal connections all attracted users to *Television Without Pity*, but what elements attracted television creators?

Independence from the Networks

At the outset of my study, few TV industry creators acknowledged online message boards, but over the course of the next decade, many began to see them as a good way to gauge audience response. One interview with writer Jill Soloway on the site began with, "So how did you find *Television Without Pity*?" She responded with, "How did I find it? Everybody knows about it."[8] A few actually became part of the community at *Television Without Pity* and entered into the fray, as it were. *Television Without Pity* boasted well over a dozen different visitors to the boards who were involved in production of programming, including cast members, producers, writers, directors and crew. During the past decade of study, I found evidence of "out" or self-identifying contributors from scripted television shows from across the site as shown in Table 1.2.

There were many others rumored to be posting under pseudonyms, and still more who discussed having read the site's recaps and forum

Table 1.2 Television creators who became *TWoP* members

Name	*Title*
Aaron Sorkin	Creator and executive producer of *The West Wing* and *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*
Cherly Heuton	Writer and producer for *Numbers*
David Mills	Creator and executive producer for *Kingpin*
Drew Greenberg	Writer for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
Jane Espenson	Writer for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
Josh Schwartz	Creator and executive producer for *The O.C.*
Judd Apatow	Creator and executive producer for *Undeclared*
Mia Kirshner	Actress on *The L Word*
Nicolas Falacci	Writer and executive producer for *Numbers*
Peter Tolan	Writer and executive producer for *Rescue Me*
Rick Cleaveland	Writer for *The West Wing*
Rob Lowe	Actor on *The West Wing*
Rob Thomas	Creator and executive producer for *Veronica Mars*
Steven DeKnight	Writer for both *Smallville* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*
Tammy Lynn Michaels	Actress on *Popular*
Tim Minear	Writer for *Angel*

discussions, but the people in the above list were notable during my study as contributors to discussion with site members. What drew them to the site? Certainly, it was primarily about the qualitative response that such a community provided, but there was also another important element: its independence from any particular fandom. As any member of a particular fandom knows, criticism is central to fan culture, but in the early 2000s, few fan groups were taken seriously as critics outside a few studies within academia. *Television Without Pity*'s allegiance to criticism over "fannishness," as it were, was an important element in legitimizing its power in terms of the perceived appropriate level of aesthetic distance necessary for valid critique.

Before the advent of Internet message boards, getting at a qualitative response to programming from the audience was not a simple task. Most networks conducted focus groups, still an industry staple. Creators of television programs relied on television critics in journalistic media, who had been reviewing programming since television's earliest days. Network executives and media sponsors often gave program creators notes providing more qualitative criticism. For most of television history, the bulk of the television audience has been treated by show creators as relatively passive, separate from the active groups of viewers such as *Star Trek* fans, who were seen as a fanatical fringe and perhaps not representative of the average viewer at home. Creators have long been encouraged to see audiences as easily classifiable demographic groups by the industry. *Television Without Pity* allowed these creators a glimpse into the critical minds of the viewers at home who perhaps did not consider themselves to be "fans" in the traditional sense. In addition, it provided feedback in real time, at the end of the airing of an episode. No doubt, the attraction for many writers and actors especially, was this treasure trove of unsolicited, anonymous reviews of their work.

The mainstreaming of fan practices happened in the early 1990s because of the proliferation of Internet use, and it essentially happened alongside this study of *Television Without Pity*. The site certainly played a role in that process of mainstreaming. Before that era, fans met in person, mailed each other photocopied 'zines, fan fiction books, and newsletters. Fan clubs and conventions had physical and geographical constraints. The Internet did not simply put fan culture online, it transformed many practices.[9] The anchor of the fan club or fan community was no longer necessary to participate in fandom. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse have documented that "fan texts are now overwhelmingly electronic, and many are transient

… national boundaries and time zones have ceased to limit fannish interaction." People who would perhaps never have joined a fan club in an offline capacity were participating in fan club rituals online, writing fan fiction, discussing their favorite television shows, and posting fan art on their websites.

Though *Television Without Pity* started at just the beginning of this shift, the mainstreaming of fan practices and digital versions of fan practices are all cornerstones of debate and inquiry in the third wave of fan studies. The first being Marxists such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, or Karl Eric Rosengren and Sven Windahl, who saw fans as dangerous, conformist, and/or pathologized their relationship with popular culture. Rosengren argued that parasocial interactions (the label given to relationships between fans and the media product) were compensation for a lack of real social life.[10]

The second wave went in a number of directions. After decades of studying what media texts "do" to audiences, scholars began to examine how audiences use and are gratified by those texts. This approach (or, more accurately, set of approaches) basically argues that people are not as powerless over their media choices as Marxist critics and effects studies theorists would like us to believe. Communications theorists like Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz argued that media is used by people to satisfy certain needs. According to their approach, people use media as a diversion or escape, as a method of creating personal relationships, as a form of personal identity, and as a way to understand their world. This is goal-oriented behavior that performs a variety of social and psychological functions. Scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley, Camille Bacon-Smith, and John Tulloch, sought to destabilize earlier accounts and show the resistant, critical, communal, and even political, nature of fan culture. Many of them were fans themselves and engaged in ethnographic analysis. The third wave is grappling with the mainstreaming of fan culture and the many new aspects of fandom in light of technological advances. The very basic definitions of fandom came up for debate.

In a 2006 issue of *Flow*, Kristina Busse asked, "what ultimately separates 'fans' from casual TV viewers who engage fannishly?"[11] It certainly had become an important question for fan studies. How can we say that these members at *TWoP* are not fans simply because they do not see themselves that way? Conversely, how presumptuous is it to designate a person as a "fan" who consciously rejects the label? Busse argued that these identities are complex, and that "we need to consider models that can

differentiate between people who are fans of a specific text, those that define themselves as fans per se, and those that are members of fandom."[12] In the 10 years that I have been thinking and writing about the members of *Television Without Pity*, I struggled to give a name to what they were. Fan-critics? Amateur critics? Viewer-critics? Certainly some of them were self-proclaimed fans with connections to fan groups, but a great deal were not. Some of my interviewees and respondents went to great lengths to distance themselves from the label:

> I don't really see myself as a "fan" per se. I like a lot of shows and post here about them, but I am not the kind of person who would go see Joss Whedon give a talk or ask for his autograph.
>
> I think what separates me from a fan is that I really, really enjoy the criticizing part way more than the adoration part.
>
> I don't buy anything related to the show. I don't have DVDs or posters on my wall. I don't know, I wouldn't say I'm a casual viewer, because I watch every week and talk the show to death at *TWoP*, but I'm not what I would consider a fan, you know?
>
> I think "fans" are people who like this show. I pretty much come here to talk about not liking it.

The quotes above are from 2004–2005, just before the debut of *The Big Bang Theory* and at the front lines of the explosion of geek culture. A few years before, films like *The Lord of the Rings*, *X-Men*, and *Spider Man* became blockbusters, and San Diego's yearly Comic-Con was becoming an A-list event. Many spaces at *Television Without Pity* were filled with "traditional" fans, who had experience in the pre-digital fan community and shepherded non-fans into the norms of fan practice. One of my interviewees from the *Smallville* boards remarked, "Oh, I know for sure that people were really surprised that not only was there fan fiction about *Smallville* already, [when the show was barely into its first season] but there was *slash* fiction." Even though, she mentioned, "most people were really into it and fascinated," there were those that "not so secretly wanted us to stop talking about Clark and Lex having relations. Like, in that they said, 'can we stop talking about this?'" Within fan culture, this kind of policing was not a rare occurrence, (particularly around the issue of slash fiction) but her recollection illustrates that these fan practices took some getting used to in a non-fan setting. As I explain in Chap. 3, eventually the fans won out, claiming that particular space for slash readings.

What the mainstreaming of fandom allowed was a qualitative approach to audience feedback. One of the most important hallmarks of contemporary television programming success has always been high Nielsen ratings, which are primarily quantitative. Nielsen ratings calculate the number and demographic of viewers for a given program. The way Nielsen gathers these statistics is primarily by using People Meters, brick-sized boxes that are attached to televisions across the nation, measuring the viewing habits of selected "Nielsen Families." To be a Nielsen family, you have to be invited. Nielsen does not release specific information about how they construct their sample size, but they argue that it accurately represents the viewing public, and that tools such as the US Census are used to gauge the demographic makeup of the country.[13] Nielsen uses this information to build a sample size of about 40,000 American households. Several times a year during "sweeps week" they also issue over one million diaries to households in specific market areas (primarily urban areas). All of this is to gauge "who" is watching—but not why they watch or what they think and feel about programming. This system was created to satisfy media sponsors. Indeed, television viewers are reduced to demographic categories (potential consumers) by this process, which works well for the network that is searching for corporate sponsorship, but not necessarily for writers who, for the most part, are trying to understand audiences as individuals in order to craft stories that they believe resonate with the culture.

Focus groups are still used by networks to understand audience response, especially for pilot episodes. According to TV scholar Jason Mittell, networks show pilots to a sample audience (composed of demographics important to the sponsors the network seeks to attract) and measure reactions using surveys, interviews and discussion sessions after a group has viewed an episode. The process, though still considered important, is also thought of as rather unreliable. Many programs that have tested poorly have gone on to do quite well, such as CBS's 1970s powerhouse *All in the Family*, or the incredibly popular NBC programs *Friends* and *Seinfeld*.[14] As a result, focus groups are more often used to confirm network executives own existing instincts about programming.[15] At best, these groups provide information about viewer preferences, not about the cultural significance a program or storyline might have. Web communities such as *Television Without Pity* are places where writers and other TV creators can understand viewers on their own terms.

Web discussion has become an important way through which creators attempt to understand their audience. When I started this study in 2000,

many networks were just starting to revamp their websites, and several did not host or encourage any form of online discussion. Most networks today have websites with message boards, Twitter accounts, and official Facebook pages. They encourage viewers to join in the discussion on a variety of social platforms and promote those platforms on television. Whole departments are in charge of the social media presence in today's television industry. In subsequent chapters, I discuss a few of the creators that entered the message boards at *Television Without Pity*. For some television creators, becoming part of these communities was about sharing their vision with like-minded, albeit staunchly critical, people. For others, the boards were simply a more anonymous and perhaps larger focus group. And for a decided few, the boards were a problem, a group of critics with no authority or right to criticize. These creators entered the boards to defend their work against criticism, or just to remind site members that they had little right to—and no authority over—the media they were invited to consume.

Studying *Television Without Pity*

Ethnography is the primary method for this study. Traditional ethnography requires the researcher to collect large amounts of data by participating and observing in a group's cultural rituals over time. Ethnographers conduct interviews, attend events, and rely on informants to guide them through interactions with the larger group. Studying television viewers using ethnographic methods has been a popular approach since the late 1980s, primarily in the field of fan studies.[16] Studying online communities, and this community in particular, requires a hard look at what audiences are, and how to study them in an ethical way. Technology necessarily requires us to rethink best practices as audience researchers.

Studying a web community was a novel idea in 2000 when I first began to examine this community. Most of my professors had little advice as to how to go about it, and some were even resistant to the idea. As I grew as a scholar, the Internet (and debates over how to study it) grew alongside me. I had to go back to basics, if you will, and ask myself important questions: how does one study a web community in an ethical and useful way? In what way will such a study be useful not only to those outside the community, but within it as well? Though seemingly recent as a field of inquiry, studies of web communities or early versions of what we would consider web communities (multi-user dungeons and the like) have been

produced for decades. However, most colleges and universities have only recently developed ethnographic research protocols for web research. Even amongst these new protocols, there are a variety of interpretations of the nature of web research (is it public or private?) and the ethical responsibilities of ethnographers (what constitutes informed consent?). Traditional ethnography typically relies on information that is willingly given or events that are expressly allowed to be observed by the researcher, and online ethnography marks a radical departure.

The work of Christine Hine, Nancy K. Baym, and Annette Markham greatly influenced my work. Sociologist Christine Hine's foray into Internet ethnography required her to make some interesting definitions. She asked: how does one define the Internet? How does one define the Internet for the purposes of ethnographic research? For Hine in 2000, there were two workable definitions: *Internet as Culture* and *Internet as Cultural Artifact*. By discussing the Internet as a culture, she argued, you would have to conceive it as a place: "it represents a place, cyberspace, where culture is formed and reformed."[17] Internet as cultural artifact sees the Internet "as a product of culture," which brings to light the very specific goals and uses for which the technology was created. According to Hine, "to speak of the Internet as a cultural artifact is to suggest that it could have been otherwise, and that what it is and what it does are the product of culturally produced understandings that can vary." Though seemingly at odds, both of these definitions of the Internet for the purpose of ethnography are useful for my study, as I saw it as something in between.

On the one hand, the site was most definitely a place. *Television Without Pity* was a site with a set of written and unwritten rules that was talked about and written about very geographically by its members (it was "visited" and was referred to as "here" and "there" and "place" in many instances). This idea has become more widespread as Internet use has proliferated. In the past decade or more, the very definition of community has undergone a significant change. Hine argues that communities are more often defined by shared social practices than by shared physical space.[18] At the outset of my study, there was a history of denying the idea that Internet communities were as valid as offline communities were. There were a great number of critics of this concept, especially when referring to text-based communication like Internet chat rooms or message boards. Communications scholar James Beniger argued in his 1987 article "Personalization of Mass Media and the Growth of Pseudocommunity"

that these are not really communities, but in fact "pseudocommunities" in which the members can have less than authentic relationships because the people participating can "log off" communities when they choose. Newer scholarship criticizes those older notions of community.

Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia argued in 1999 that "social network analysts have had to educate traditional, place-oriented, community sociologists that community can stretch well beyond the neighborhood."[19] Their study of virtual communities argued that they differ from "real-life" communities but the relationships built there are very similar. As indicated by my research, indeed, online communities and the relationships between members have varying degrees of authenticity that would be very difficult to distinguish from offline relationships. Contemporary discussions of web communities rarely traverse this debate, and take it as a given that social networks are communities woven into a complex experience of on and offline worlds. For Christine Hine, to deny the label of community to a group of people is a political act. That denial seeks to disenfranchise. For the purposes of this study, I regard *Television Without Pity* as a community. Its members and founders refered to it as such in passing as well as during moments in which they felt they were being attacked by perceived outsiders.

Many studies of the Internet have approached spaces online as cultures and largely avoided exploring the ways in which those same spaces are artifacts. *Television Without Pity* is a good example of the flexibility with which the web, and specifically web communities, needs to be studied. To gain access into its usage as an artifact, the researcher must examine the relationship between the technology and the user. An artifact is a thing created or used, a finite object or item. Though the notion of community seems at odds with the status of an object to be studied, the nature of web communities is perhaps a bit more finite than offline communities. There is the matter of specific technology, common usage of that technology and the record of usage, which cannot be ignored in favor of just getting to the core of the conversations that happen there. Here I explore the limitations and boundaries of the technology as well as the ways in which members make use of it across a very important spectrum of time for the development of web communities (2000–2010). The complexity of the web and its communities demands a middle ground, and more than a little flexibility.

Studying *Television Without Pity* meant thinking about communication through technology, and exploring discourse analysis and the concept of

"extralinguistic behavior." Observation of body language has traditionally been a crucial component of ethnography, revealing another level of communication and meaning. In Janice Radway's study of romance novel readers, a sense of the real connection between the researcher and the women in the study can be ascertained. She establishes in her book, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, that she began to feel connected to the women and, even though by the end of the work she becomes somewhat of a detached observer, she still views herself as part of a community of women that includes the Smithton readers. The opposite can be true of online ethnographies, in which researchers can be detached from the community they study (especially if they are not participators in the discussion). However, at the same time, they are privy to all sorts of information that may not be discussed in the explicit presence of a researcher.

Because there is rarely face-to-face conversation in studying a web community, it has been argued that a very important element of research is missing. Research guides sometimes point out that Internet ethnography might not be an appropriate choice due to the "limited nature of the interaction."[20] Looking closer, however, I found that there are many ways a researcher could observe behavior online. According to Sociologist Chava Frankfort-Nachmias, there are four major areas of observational interest: non-verbal behavior, spatial behavior, linguistic behavior, and extralinguistic behavior.[21] Non-verbal behavior, such as body language and facial expression, is already online through the use of emoticons and the frequent descriptions of body language offered by *Television Without Pity* members.

Some members used popular early Internet conventions such as emoticons, colons and parentheses to indicate smiles, or acronyms such as "LOL" to indicate that she or he was "laughing out loud." Others used multiple parentheses to indicate hugging another member; for instance, ((jenn)) means the poster is virtually hugging jenn. This could also be considered spatial behavior. Many *Television Without Pity* members simply wrote out their bodily expressions in plain language, such as when one poster wrote "gasp" as a response to surprising information, another indicated that she "shrugs" at the idea of a spinoff of *Friends*, yet another "rolls eyes" at the idea of romantic pairing offered by another member. In terms of extralinguistic behaviors, which include the rate at which one speaks, loudness, the tendency to interrupt others, and ways of pronunciation, some of these can also be observed online. Loudness is often

conveyed by using all capital letters. Indeed, *Television Without Pity*'s rules indicate that there is no reason to "shout" and that it is rude, so posters were encouraged not to use all capital letters in their posts unless their intention was to "shout." Ways of pronunciation are often indicated by changes in conventional spellings of words. Though it may be difficult to ascertain the rate at which one speaks in the real world via online discussion, there were members who inflected their posts with ellipses to indicate long pauses between words as well as some who ran words together with no spaces to eliminate any pause. For this particular study, the rate at which a person interrupts another would be impossible to ascertain, since, unlike in a chat room or offline conversation, the software allows each person's message to post completely before another is posted. Though it seems that online research consists of only dialogue, there is a lot more than simply dialogue to observe.

This does not mean that all is revealed by having a deeper understanding of computerized language. As a researcher, I cannot see when someone is brought to tears by another's comments unless she or he mentions it purposefully. Any attempts at hiding emotional or bodily responses are kept well under wraps if a participant so chooses. Internet communication may be more complex than previously thought, but it would be foolish to assume that it could offer complete transparency. Furthermore, I would argue the same for traditional ethnographies as well. Body language is important to observe, but the language of the body is not altogether uncontrolled. One person may betray their words with body language or facial expressions, while another may be more adept at concealing their true emotions.

Matt Hills' study of Internet ethnographies (as well as his own study of a group of *X-Files* fans on the web) describes that, in the wake of researcher access to Internet conversations, there has been a resurgence of some of the early assumptions about the method of ethnography, namely that it can accurately "reveal" a particular group. For Hills, Internet discourse and the study of that discourse are fraught with problems. He begins by arguing that initially many scholars viewed Internet discourse as a site for perfect ethnography. Finally, it was assumed, a researcher could view a fan community's conversation without being obtrusive, and furthermore, the whole thing is recorded as text, even conversations that last weeks or months. He referred to this as the "oft-fantasised position of non-interventionist data-gathering." This assumption of transparency, Hills argues, is a fantasy. If anything, Internet discourse has proved to make the

ethnographic task more daunting. The mass of data online illustrates how difficult it is for researchers to create any sort of coherence.[22]

For Hills, the artificial boundaries that are created by researchers cannot fully explain the experience of the message board or chat room because users do not draw such boundaries. As a member of many off- and online communities, I find it hard to believe that anyone could fully explain the experience of any inter-group communication. Conversations are circuitous, weaving throughout different threads of the message board community. For each participator, the experience is different. For instance, those members of *Television Without Pity* who stay out of the threads that discuss fan fiction or spoilers get a different experience than those who frequent them often. Therefore, though elaborating upon the ways in which posters communicate is definitely a goal, I do so with no intention of "delivering" the culture of *Television Without Pity* to the reader. My choices deliver a different version of the site than any other researcher. Similarly, scholars such as Jonathan Gray and Mark Andrejevic's, both of whom studied the *TWoP* community, each found different aspects of the community to explore. Certainly there are some threads that would connect all studies of the site, but because *TWoP* was so vast and so full of micro-communities, the coherence of any study should be questioned.

Television Without Pity's message boards were originally created for a small online community; however, unlike many websites, it achieved incredible popularity. Its message boards attracted the attention of television critics at such publications as *New York Times Magazine*, actors, directors, writers and producers of network television programs (some of whom posted as members, while others were interviewed by *Television Without Pity* writers). It was a corner of the Internet that had been assumed to be relatively private for its first few years. Its eventual "public-ness" was part of the allure for many members, some of who hoped that showrunners were listening to (or in this case, reading) what viewers had to say about television programs. As a participant-observer I recorded the dialogue by making a digital archive of certain message board topics, taking detailed field notes on the discourse, and conducting interviews with site founders and members. I felt it was important to conduct interviews with members and site founders to explore not just the experiences and thoughts that were outside the purview of the specific topics on the site, but also the way the technology complicated their experience.

One of Matt Hills' most prevalent concerns about online ethnography is that the technology tends to disappear. Researchers tend to dismiss it

and focus on the interactions between participants as if technology is not a factor. For him, culture online is not simply a digital version of offline culture. The technology itself creates boundaries for discussion, at least in the world of chats, message boards, instant messaging, and blog posting. There is an order and sometimes even a hierarchy to conversations online that is created by the site's interface, policies and moderators. For instance, he explains that the Internet favors timely, or topical, posts. This results in a discourse that is enmeshed with the rhythms of the commercial program. Fans or viewers who log on during commercials and after the show ends have a different experience from those who come into the conversation later, and must do a certain amount of "catching up" before contributing. *Television Without Pity* attempted to create rules to circumvent this (not allowing posts until after a broadcast ends, for instance), but viewers who lived on the American west coast found that they were always entering the conversation "late" due to broadcast times. In addition, fans in different countries sometimes refrained from joining certain discussions until months later, when they had finally seen the broadcast.[23]

As I have interviews and message board data, I have two distinct categories of participants and respective confidentiality for both. The first group of participants I describe as *public forum participants*, while the second group is described as *individual interview participants*. For public forum participants, most of my evidence comes from the message board posts, which were published on the site. The website was available for anyone to view and there was a general knowledge of the site as a public space, but it is now a "dead" site. *Television Without Pity* closed in 2013 and as a result, the message boards are no longer hosted by the NBCUniversal servers. All publications have ceased. If you were to do a simple *Google* search for my quotes from the boards, you would likely not find the original site. In fact, it periodically gets removed from even the Internet Archive, or Wayback Machine, so that there is no permanent evidence that remains of the conversations that happened there.

Regardless of its shifting "publicness" or "privateness" as an unarchived site, I have maintained the confidentiality of all message board posters in order to respect the privacy of users. When I began collecting data as part of my dissertation project, I had to adjust certain elements of my process. Initially, I was using member usernames in my notes and analysis of the site. I had read academic works on Internet communities, and many of them used real usernames and legal names in the text. My study was one of the first of its kind for my department and the university. There was a

bit of debate over whether or not the study would in any way harm the participants.

Malin Sveningsson Elm's scholarship discusses the ways researchers' notions of privacy have an effect on their research choices. She chronicles this kind of debate I was having in 2005 with my university's Internal Review Board in a chapter of Annette Markham and Nancy K. Baym's 2009 book, *Internet Inquiry: Conversations about Method*. Many researchers, she argued, were asking "Is the environment public enough for us to study without getting informed consent?" She argues that notions of public and private were perceptions, not facts, and that, "it can sometimes be acceptable to collect and use research data without getting informed consent, under the condition that the environment under study is public and the content is not sensitive." Online environments, she notes, are complex and one site can have varying levels of privacy.[24] To ensure that my subjects were not harmed, after a bit of back and forth, it was decreed by my Internal Review Board that I would remove any reference to usernames or personal information that might connect a reader to specific subjects of my study.

At first I was disappointed to have to scrub the usernames from the record. They gave a great deal of insight into the poster, a little indicator of their fan affiliation or attitude. But I saw the value in the IRB's decision. Some members have gone on to other websites and continued to use the same usernames. Thus, I do not include any usernames and individual interview participants are referred to by given names, usernames, or are discussed anonymously, depending on their stated preference. I do name the paid authors who were employed by the site, however. Site recappers/moderators from the message boards are addressed by username. Some of these authors published at *Television Without Pity* under pseudonyms, and so are referred to by that pseudonym in my discussions about the message boards or the posts on the site. In later years, there are those who have gone on to writing careers, sometimes publishing articles about their time at *Television Without Pity* for professional publications. If they connect their real name to a username in a public forum like a blog or magazine interview, I refer to them by both.

Each of my interviewees was subject to the same informed-consent practices of a typical ethnography or oral history interview. I selected various members who posted in the message boards for interviews based on the relevancy of their posts to my research. I informed interviewees of the nature of my study and allowed them the opportunity to view and respond

to my research analysis. I use demographic and other personal information about those members who willingly gave their information via interview or survey.

I examined a large number of message board threads in the *Television Without Pity* community, all of which had fluctuating numbers of participants on a daily basis. Most Internet researchers have to battle with setting boundaries on their projects, and mine indeed felt like a battle. The average message board topic thread had 68 posts per day, but the more popular threads had sometimes up to 1100 posts per day. I archived entire topics in digital format. I included message boards for a variety of the most popular television programs, all of the topics in the "reality TV" message boards, and the "TV Potluck" message board, which discussed everything from commercials and ratings to social issues. Some of the site members were not available for interview participation because they did not make their contact information available on the site. For individual member interviews, I contacted participants by email and eventually conducted a number of email and telephone interviews.

Since the site had over 10,000 individual message board topics and attracted over 1 million unique visitors a month, it was impossible to make all participants explicitly aware of my project. *Television Without Pity* also had a rule against "discussing the boards on the boards" (creating discussions around site policies, cliques or criticism of the site and site managers), which prevented me from declaring my research intentions or goals in any message board. I posted about my intentions in one message board early on in the study and the post was deleted by the forum moderator. Two of the site founders (Ariana Cole and Sarah Bunting) were both aware of my study when I started and back in 2002 indicated that many researchers have used the site, though primarily in projects in the business and communications fields. Individual members/posters whom I contacted for further interviews were made aware of the project and its goals in the text of the email as well as part of the informed consent document.

The popularity of the site had its advantages, as *Television Without Pity* had its share of critics. Some even had websites devoted to discrediting the recaps and airing grievances about the site's policies. Sites like *TWOP Crit* and *TWOP Sucks* had interesting discussions about the popularity of *Television Without Pity*, including arguments over whether the site made for an appropriate scholarly topic.

I documented a great deal of site discourse for over 10 years. In that time, I ventured into a number of message boards of varying themes and

topics. I spent much of my time on the most popular message boards, so a bulk of the data was culled from the *Buffy the Vampire*, *Smallville*, and *West Wing* boards. They also happened to be message boards for programs whose creators often checked in or contributed to discussion, though in varying ways. In addition to these large discussions, I looked into quite a few lesser-trafficked boards to get a feel for different parts of the site (as each board has its own sort of mini-culture), as well as for different genres of television. I also paid close attention to message boards that discussed the cultural importance of television, corporate practices, and politics.[25]

In addition to analyzing the discourse on these message boards, I also conducted several interviews as well as an online survey. The survey invited some of the most prolific posters to discuss what drew them to the site and how it was part of their offline lives. Of the 32 respondents, 74 percent held middle-class jobs making an average of $50 k/year, while 26 percent held working-class jobs, making an average of $15 k/year. All of my respondents were college-educated, and a third of them held or were working toward graduate degrees. I also had a heavy response from women, who made up the majority of *Television Without Pity* members. Only one male responded to my survey query. Most of them considered themselves politically "liberal," but a small minority of 12 percent saw themselves as "very liberal or radical." All of the members who responded to my online survey had been members of the *Television Without Pity* community for over 5 years and participated regularly in a variety of message boards. Only one respondent had a specific genre of programming she discussed on the site, only visiting "reality show" message boards. Several of these respondents granted me follow-up interviews. I also conducted interviews with site cofounders David T. Cole, Sarah Bunting, and Tara Ariano, as well as Rachel Larris, one of the message board posters who had been actively participating in the message board where television executive Aaron Sorkin entered to defend his work on *The West Wing*. Early on in this study, I twice visited the Los Angeles area *TWoP*-Con, a convention of *TWoP* community members hosted at "The Pig and Whistle" restaurant in Hollywood, California.

When I first began this study, there were no academic analyses of this site, and as of 2015, there are but a handful. As I will discuss in later chapters, Mark Andrejevic's "Watching Television Without Pity" and Jonathan Gray's "Antifandom and the Moral Text" are two excellent articles that provide excellent context and exploration of the culture at the site. I found that some of the cultural analyses of the site tended to focus on very limited areas, and journalists primarily examined the site as a kind of focus group.

Most of these analyses were conducted by authors who did not identify as site members. I hope that my study adds to the academic discussion of the culture of *Television Without Pity* by taking a varied approach.

I made it a point to explore message boards that span a variety of different programming genres. So much of the study of fan culture has focused on science fiction and fantasy genres, and I wanted to see if the practices and communication styles of genres without a long history of active fandom (like reality programming, for instance) were any different from those in say the *Buffy* or *Smallville* message boards. I examined message boards for programs in the drama, sitcom, and reality categories, as well as some programs on subscription cable channels.

I also examined message board threads that discussed broad issues related to television, as well as those that specifically touched on the political and social impact of media. Moreover, I made sure that I explored threads that were about the site itself, though there were very few. In order to examine how the community saw itself and interacted with one other, I made sure to go to threads where members talked about rules, media exposure, and meeting up in person. I wanted to look at the cultural function of the site by exploring issues of community both off- and online. And since it was difficult to find out what community members thought about the site (on account of the policy that you could not discuss the "boards on the boards"), I also wanted to get at those perspectives with surveys and interviews.

Finally, as a member and frequent contributor, I hope to move away from the notion that *Television Without Pity* was just another example of a Web 2.0 business model, or a simplified qualitative approach to ratings. The term "Web 2.0" is contested in academic discourse, but here I generally mean the new model of engagement between media companies and audiences via the web. Namely, encouraging users to generate and categorize content. As succinctly put by Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green in *Spreadable Media*, "The tenets of Web 2.0 entice audience members to join in the building and customizing of services and messages rather than to expect companies to present complete and fully formed experiences."[26] *TWoP* was not just a way for networks to engage (and thus exploit) a fan base or as an electronic focus group. I explored it as a participatory culture that kept pushing at the boundaries set for it by its various owners. Ethnography has its limitations, but it also provides a great number of benefits in a project such as this one. There were depths reached in the course of being part of an online community

that would have easily been ignored or unnoticed in merely quoting message board conversations.

Conclusion

The bulk of data required for a study such as this was, to be frank, staggering. In the beginning, I felt addicted to the site as both an armchair television critic and as a young scholar of contemporary media. I copied and pasted pages and pages of data until the technology of message boards allowed for easy one-button downloading of entire message board threads. Over the course of the study, I spoke with many people who were similarly drawn to the site, making it a daily habit to visit the message boards of their favorite programs. Like many of them, I was willingly (and gladly) reading over 500 posts about the use of the addiction metaphor in episodes of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. I was excited when the site was referred to by name in an episode of *My Name Is Earl* and logged in as soon as I saw it to be part of the debate over whether it was an insult or a compliment. Members who had joined before I did in 2000 were still there, posting their thoughts about television, when I ended my study in 2010. A complex mix of technology, entrepreneurial spirit, and the desire to participate in (and not just watch) television, drove the huge community at *Television Without Pity* into being. I hope this study explores some of the more interesting and remarkable aspects of a participatory culture that paved the way for our contemporary understanding of the television audience.

Notes

1. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
2. Barbara Martinez, "On the Web, a Network of Television Viewers," *Washington Post* (12 November 2002), accessed 20 December 2002, http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/2002/11/12/on-the-web-a-network-of-television-viewers/3760f386-125f-4a32-b94f-545515281233/
3. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
4. Most of the recent statistical information was gathered from site co-founder Tara Ariano's online resume via *LinkedIn*, accessed 2 March 2011, http://www.linkedin.com/in/taraariano
5. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.

6. Nicole Neroulias, "Couch Potatoes Thrive Online," *Columbia News Service*, accessed 20 June 2002, http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/cns/2002-03-04/234.asp (site no longer active)
7. I explain more about this turn in Chap. 7.
8. M. Giant, "Interview with Jill Soloway—writer for Six Feet Under," *Television Without Pity,* accessed 30 August, 2005, http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/six-feet-under/the-jill-soloway-interview/
9. Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds., *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet,* (London: McFarland & Company Publishers, Inc., 2006): 13.
10. Rosengren, K. E., and S. Windahl, "Mass Media Consumption as a Functional Alternative," in *Sociology of Mass Communication,* David McQuail, ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1972) 166–194.
11. Kristina Busse, "Fandom-is-a-Way-of-Life vs. Watercooler Discussion; or, The Geek Hierarchy as Fannish Identity Politics," *FlowTV* 5.13 (18 November, 2006), accessed 14 November, 2015, http://flowtv.org/2006/11/taste-and-fandom/
12. Kristina Busse, "Fandom-is-a-Way-of-Life vs. Watercooler Discussion; or, The Geek Hierarchy as Fannish Identity Politics," *FlowTV* 5.13 (18 November, 2006), accessed 14 November, 2015, http://flowtv.org/2006/11/taste-and-fandom/
13. Nielsen Media Research, "TV Research" accessed 31 May 2010, http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/solutions/measurement/television.html
14. Gavin Polone, "The Folly of Having Focus Groups Judge TV Pilots," *Vulture,* last modified 9 May 2012, accessed 21 May 2012 http://www.vulture.com/2012/05/tv-pilot-focus-groups-gavin-polone.html
15. Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 50–51.
16. Ethnographies published in 1992 by Camille Bacon-Smith and Henry Jenkins about *Star Trek* fan communities found that the creative works of fans, particularly fan fiction not only challenged the ideas of the creators of *Star Trek*, but also delved into the politics of gender and sexuality. Far from escaping the real world, these fans confronted real world problems all the time in their creative works and through discussions of the program in social groups. Both authors challenged the notion of television as a one-way transmission, insisting that audiences weren't possessed by the media as argued by Frankfurt School theorists, but rather feel that they possess it, and feel free to use it to tell their own stories. Studies such as these showed that at least some audiences were active, rather than passive.
17. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications, 2000), 9.
18. Christine Hine, *Virtual Ethnography* (London: Sage Publications, 2000),19.

19. Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone, "in *Communities in Cyberspace*, Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1999): 169.
20. Claire Hewson, Peter Yule, Dianna Laurent and Carl Vogel, *Internet Research Methods: A Practical Guide for the Social and Behavioural Sciences,* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2002): 50.
21. Chava Frankfort-Nachmias, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 210.
22. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002). 174–175.
23. Matt Hills, *Fan Cultures* (London: Routledge, 2002): 176–177.
24. Malin Sveningsson Elm, "How Do Various Notions of Privacy Influence Decisions in Qualitative Internet Research?" in Internet Inquiry: Conversations About Method, Annette N. Markham and Nancy K. Baym, eds. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc., 2009): 77–85.
25. See the Appendix for a complete list of the message boards I frequented during the study.
26. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green in *Spreadable Media* (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 49.

CHAPTER 2

"The Industry": A Brief History of Audiences In and Out of Control

For many members of *Television Without Pity*, the site was a place through which they could voice their concerns to the creators of television programs. Frequently these creators were discussed and referred to by name. Often, there were entire threads aimed at getting the attention of show runners, such as the threads entitled, "An Open Letter to the Powers that Be." Many of the members of the *TWoP* community were aware that quite a few people may have authorial control over a program. When discussing this vaguely defined group, they often used the term, "the powers that be," or "TPTB" for short. This can included directors, network executives, even media sponsors. Comments and criticism were also aimed at actors, writers, and (in the case of *Sex & the City*) the occasional costume designer. The web has brought discussions that were once kept within the walls of fan conventions, or perhaps restricted to the even more personal "water-cooler" conversation, into a more accessible and global public space. For the individual viewer, reaching the ears of "the powers that be" is more possible than ever as a result of the proliferation of Internet use. More and more viewers feel emboldened to make specific requests of those who create their entertainment. But the idea of audience rights, or alternately "audience sovereignty," that is embodied in these electronic criticisms spans centuries. The long tradition of active, engaged criticism could be connected to the development of ideas about political democracy and human rights. A look at historical audiences and their connection to politics as audiences and individuals brings to light the notion that

S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50000-7_2

Television Without Pity's member practices are not new, and that they may be connected to larger political ideas about autonomy and power. Indeed, the "new" practices of audiences online in places like *Television Without Pity* are very similar to the practices and expectations of early American novel readers and theatergoers. It is only with the industrialization of entertainment that audiences became thought of as passive bystanders who only use entertainment as a form of escape.

The Epistolary Novel, Psychological Identification, and the Emergence of Human Rights

How are novel readers connected to the concept of human rights and the development of political and social change? In her book *Inventing Human Rights* historian Lynn Hunt discusses the rise of the epistolary novel in the eighteenth century and draws connections to developing new social and political ideas about human rights. Hunt argues that "human rights require three interlocking qualities: rights must be natural (inherent in human beings), equal (the same for everyone) and universal (applicable everywhere)," and that these ideas evolved during the eighteenth century alongside a particularly engaging literary form. Written as a series of letters, diary entries, or other documents, the epistolary novel allows the reader privileged access to the characters without the need for an omniscient narrator. For Hunt, psychological identification is central to this narrative form, and it can engender empathy in the reader. Because the epistolary form has an aspect of realism and sense of direct connection to the characters through their personal letters or diary entries, Hunt argues that it "enabled readers to empathize across class, sex, and national lines."[1] At the height of the genre, novels such as Samuel Richardson's *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* in 1740, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* in 1748, and Rousseau's *Julie, or the New Heloise* in 1761 were important contributions to the form because they were written about "ordinary people," and according to Hunt, this had significant political implications:

> Novels made the point that all people are fundamentally similar because of their inner feelings, and many novels showcased in particular the desire for autonomy. In this way, reading novels created a sense of equality and empathy through passionate involvement in the narrative.[2]

Novels of the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries tended to focus on aristocratic characters. Hunt notes that the eighteenth-century novels that emerged during the epistolary novel's heyday were centered on characters that were "servants, sailors, and middle class girls." Audience connection to the characters and investment in the text is linked, she argues, to a new era of political enfranchisement and human rights. For Hunt, "new kinds of reading (and viewing and listening) created new individual experiences (empathy), which in turn made possible new social and political concepts (human rights)."[3] Hunt's argument here indicates that the immense popularity of epistolary novels during this period engendered a shift in consciousness concerning the definition of humanity, leading to democratic revolutions in both France and the United States. Readers who identified with characters that were unlike them in social standing, nationality, and class became citizens who supported expanding the concept of humanity to include servants, slaves, women, and other marginalized groups.

Hunt's argument is useful for understanding audiences and in particular *actively engaged* audiences because she connects the practice of audience identification with fictional characters to a kind of political change. Deeply identifying with fictional characters, connecting to their experiences, exploring real world politics through fictional characters, these are practices that most recently have been regarded to be primarily the activity of twentieth-century media fans.

Though fannish behavior that is associated with this kind of identification was certainly part of the culture of *Television Without Pity*, many of my respondents aimed to distance themselves from the kind of deep fan engagement in order to present themselves as valid critics. A few mentioned that they felt their value and the value of the site depended on a kind of intellectual distance from their object of criticism. One remarked that she was not a "fangirl," who was going to "suck up to TPTB" and that the stance was what ultimately garnered respect from creators. She then immediately reneged on her statement, saying, "I mean, if they look at my posts there are probably a lot quasi love letters to Faith and Cordy, but very well-reasoned love letters!" Feeling the need to mark that distance and downplay the role of emotional identification with fictional characters is in many ways a result of the ridicule fans have historically received for that identification. The same practices ridiculed today may have a longer history, and contributed to, or at least are intertwined with, a political ideology of autonomy and human rights.

The Fear of the Active Audience: Theater and Public Performance in the Nineteenth Century

The active, participatory audience that is often championed by academics such as Henry Jenkins and John Fiske was commonplace in British and American theater up until the mid-nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, aristocratic audiences already considered themselves to be in the authorial position at a given performance. In Elizabethan England, the theater experience was one that involved socializing, smoking, drinking, and even groping or taunting the actors. For British aristocrats, actors were akin to a servant class and did not deserve deference.[4] Even in Restoration Theater, which was more exclusive and expensive, members of the noble class used their theater boxes as places to play cards, or engage in loud debates and spirited chats. It was also common for members of the merchant class who sat in the pits to chat loudly, critique the performances, and wander around the theater. It was not unheard of for audience members to sit on stage and demand attention for themselves. This became so much of a nuisance that in 1762, sitting on the stage was banned in British theaters, but audience activity continued to flourish. Sociologist Richard Butsch, whose book, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990*, chronicles this era, points out that much of this "rowdiness" was focused on the play itself and the actors. Audience critiques of theater performances were vocal and immediate. Shouts sometimes led to brawls and, on more than one occasion, to riots.[5] European public performances also included parades, street theater, and carnivals, which were generally the traditions of the lower classes. These too were performances in which audiences were participators in entertainment and sometimes considered out of control, erupting into violence.

All of these traditions were eventually exported to the United States via English and other European immigrants. According to Butsch, American theater managers and civil authorities respected audience sovereignty until the late-nineteenth century. Calling for specific songs to be sung, chastising actors, hissing, and throwing objects—all to get the performance tailored to their vision—were expected elements of the theater experience.

The rhetoric of the Revolutionary War encouraged the lower classes to assert their rights as theater-goers in the same fashion. For Alexis de Tocqueville, the theater was a key indicator of political change. "If you want advance knowledge of the literature of a people which is turning toward democracy, pay attention to the theater," because in the theater,

audiences "want the talk to be about themselves and to see the present world mirrored."[6] An examination of the playwrights and subject matter of republican-era plays shows that colonial audiences had access to a diverse spectrum of political thought and language. Republicanism, liberalism, the Protestant work ethic and ideas about the sovereignty of state power all circulated through plays of the eighteenth century, and the idea of American patriotism coalesced in that space as much as in other realms of the public sphere. Many theater-goers saw themselves as political beings and their entertainment reflected and shaped their political thought. When their "present world" was not mirrored, audiences reacted loudly. Historian Lawrence Levine noted that even as late as 1833 at the American Theater in New York, the audience was particularly displeased with an overture and loudly called for the patriotic "Yankee Doodle Dandy" to be played instead, which it immediately was, to "great satisfaction."[7] The call for a patriotic song during a play both criticized the performance and the ability of the topic to hold audience attention.

In the Jacksonian era, from about 1825–1850, young, working-class men were some of the most consistent theater-goers, and class issues were an important part of the theater experience. In New York, the Bowery Theater actively courted a working-class audience. The Bowery B'hoys, as they came to be called, were a force to be reckoned with. Debate and a certain amount of noisy activity were certainly part of the theater experience before the B'hoys, but these working-class men often punctuated their demands with physical violence. And New York was not the only place where the theater experience began to change, as many theaters courted working-class patrons in cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and New Orleans.[8]

Close to the Bowery Theater in the East Village was the Astor Place Opera House, known to many students of history for the Astor Place Riot of 1849, which took place there. Lawrence Levine's examination of Shakespeare in nineteenth century United States in his book, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, situates the riot within the emerging politics of class in a growing country. Resulting in the deaths of 22 people, wounding over 150, the riot is often attributed to the differing performances of two actors in competing runs of the play *Macbeth*. Edwin Forrest, an American actor, was well known for his Shakespearean performances in the Bowery, having made his mark first with *Othello* at the Bowery Theater in 1826. It was his Philadelphia-born, working-class upbringing, along with his public promotion of what he

considered to be values of egalitarianism and upward social mobility, that captured American audiences, who were equally disenchanted with his contemporary, William Charles Macready. Macready, an Englishman, had both a different acting style and different class allegiances. While Forrest was a relatively new American actor on his way up, Macready was already referred to as one of the best performers of his day. Levine describes his acting style as "cerebral" and his demeanor "aristocratic." When the two appeared in competing performances of *Macbeth* in May of 1849, the primarily working-class audience found the Forrest rendition to be worthy of standing ovations, while Macready was unable to perform due to the vocal and physical attacks from the audience.

Food and furniture, along with hisses and boos, assailed Macready well into the third act, when he finally left the stage. Days later, after being coaxed into performing again by friends, thousands of people filled the Astor Place Theater and the surrounding streets. Over 10,000 people staged a protest of the production. Though the event has been described as absurd by contemporary observers, it illustrates an important aspect of audience sovereignty at the heart of entertainment. On the surface this was a riot about which performance of *Macbeth* was more popular, but looking closely, we can see that anxieties about class abound. Rioters chanted slogans like "Burn the damned den of the aristocracy!" and lamented that the theater required too many rules of etiquette be followed that alienated working-class audiences, such as wearing fine clothing. After a militia detachment shot directly into the crowd, the riot was contained, but the underlying problems were not. Not since the American Revolution had a militia been needed to suppress violence in an American city.[9] This rebellion against the theater was not about acting style, but about the assumption that the aristocracy had the power to decide what constituted appropriate entertainment. As Levine notes,

> From the rhetoric used both during and after the riot, it is clear that many of those who engaged in it understood that to term the altercation between Forrest and Macready a personal one was only a partial truth; that in a larger and truer sense it was a clash over questions of cultural values, over the role of people in culture.

In the public proceedings and newspaper stories that followed the Astor Place Riot, the discussion of audience sovereignty was right on the surface. Despite the offense of vandalism that occurred at the theater, which

many condemned, the right to boo, hiss and otherwise express displeasure loudly in the theater was regarded as a right of all audience members.

As Levine explains, the theater experience of the time as very similar to today's sporting events,

> in which the spectators not only are similarly heterogeneous but are also—in the manner of both the nineteenth century and the Elizabethan era—more than an audience; they are participants who can enter into the action on the field, who feel a sense of immediacy and at times even of control, who articulate their opinions and feelings vocally and unmistakably.[10]

Levine notes that the theater was a "microcosm of American society," and that though different groups may have had different vantage points, (white) people of all classes were present for any given performance and all of them involved themselves in some way with the performance.

Levine's connection of such active audience behavior to contemporary sports fans is very telling. In 1988 when his book *Highbrow/Lowbrow* was published, he did not see the idea that media fans would be similar subjects. A sense of "immediacy" and certainly a sense of "control" have always been at the heart of fan culture, more so with the advent of Internet communication, where a creator could see fan critiques and draw from them in the writers room. Fans have always voiced their opinions, but the Internet has perhaps made them more "vocal" and "unmistakable." Whether it is aimed at Aaron Sorkin or a cast member from *The Real World*, the members of *Television Without Pity* are brash and assert their right to be heard even when (or especially when) in the presence of actual creators. According to Levine, this empowered audience identity is historically specifically American.

Outsiders' accounts of nineteenth-century performances were usually peppered with references to this particularly American experience. English writer Frances Trollope noted in 1832 that the American Shakespeare performances she attended (in several different cities) were incredibly noisy. She remarked that "every man seemed to think his reputation as a citizen depended on the noises he made," and that rather than polite applause, stamping of feet and crying out were the norm. In the theater and at the opera house, audience outbursts were becoming problematic for critics, who primarily supported the aims of or were themselves part of the upper class.

The Astor Place riot demonstrated for many of these critics and members of the elite the need for censure and a revision of the rules of audience

etiquette. The Bowery B'hoys were thought of as emblematic of the class problem plaguing the theater and the opera house. They were described as not just rowdy, but "ill bred" and "brutes" that did not know how to appreciate the arts. Thereafter, calls for audience sovereignty become drowned out in a tide of discussion of the civilizing rules of culture.

Rules and civility are considered hallmarks of *Television Without Pity*. Members often used the word "civilized" to describe the culture there, and specifically pointed to the extensive rules as the basis for that civility. Despite the fact that they were often like the "brutes" of nineteenth-century American theater audiences in their pointed barbs aimed at television creators. Many felt that their criticisms were important, and because of the higher standard the site set for its members and readers, more valid.

The nineteenth century saw an increase in the pace of industrialization and urbanization, as well as the influx of millions of immigrants from all over Europe and Asia. Levine's major contention in *Highbrow/Lowbrow* is that as the nation underwent these changes, the elites started to develop anxieties about their treasured status. As the middle class grew in number, as immigrants brought with them their own cultural rituals and stories (Germans began introducing the beer garden, Irish funeral services incorporated loud singing), the need for a "civilizing" system of etiquette and a criticism of "uncivilized" forms of entertainment became more pronounced. Culture with a capital "C" became a way to push back against the tide of change that threatened to place aristocratic style and tradition—and the aristocrats themselves—lower on the socio-cultural hierarchy. Establishing cultural superiority required responding on several levels. The elite decided to,

> retreat into their own private spaces whenever possible; to transform public spaces by rules, systems of taste and canons of behavior of their own choosing; and, finally, to convert the strangers so that their modes of behavior and cultural predilections emulated those of the elites. [11]

These fears and anxieties changed the entertainment experience in the United States. Shakespearean performance becomes an emblem of upper-class taste, and increasingly theater managers restricted the outbursts and responses of audience members, classifying those behaviors as uncivilized and unenlightened. The opera houses no longer played classics alongside contemporary compositions. The places where these performances

occurred became sacralized, emblems of a culture worthy of comparison to the aristocracy in Europe.

The Astor Place Riot would perhaps have been understood differently in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. Even if theaters had been thought of as refined places (they were decidedly not), elites in those eras were more tolerant of crowd actions, even when they got violent or destroyed property. Crowd actions, carnivals, and riots had a long European tradition. In the England of those eras, crowd actions such as those were often the sole courses available to common people as a means of political expression. There were boundaries, of course, but protests and crowd actions were how the aristocracy understood the scale of grievances and the urgent need to rectify injustice.[12] The carnival, with its encouragement of out-of-control behavior, disrespect and mockery of authority figures, and addressing of grievances via calculated performance, was a sanctioned crowd action. Richard Butsch argues that the changes that occur as a result of urbanization and immigration created an environment more heterogeneous and anonymous. In the nineteenth century, he argues, the crowd was "redefined as a fearful mob, an irrational and destructive beast, spurred by emotion and reckless in its actions."[13] Thereafter we see a growing concern over the "crowd," whose outbursts become a disruption rather than a social barometer. Crowd psychology developed at the end of the nineteenth century, which began to claim that individuals lose their ability to reason when they became part of a crowd.[14]

The Fear of the Passive Audience: Film Audiences

The "disciplining" of the audience became more prominent as America's entertainments became more professionalized, especially new forms of mass media like film. As nickelodeons, picture halls and electric theaters began their ascent in popularity, so too did the idea of the audience as a "mass" of people, acting uniformly, in ways that might threaten public order. The fear that urbanization was creating communities that were not as solid or as homogeneous as they had been during the America's agrarian early history led many sociologists and psychologists to express concern that people were becoming more vulnerable to suggestion by the entertainments they consume. Film, sheet music, and even musical performances became standardized. The timing of film presentation was changing. In earlier eras, movies ran continuously on a loop and theater-goers walked in while a film was in progress. Set schedules for film screenings

began to become the norm. More people across the nation were consuming almost the same entertainment, and audiences were becoming talked about the same way, as interchangeable, as indistinguishable, as a "mass." The 1928 silent film *The Crowd* by King Vidor dramatizes some of these anxieties over living in the urban environment, with scenes that show the central character literally swept aside by an uncaring crowd in the heart the city.

As sound movies, or "talkies," began so did the renovation of many movie theaters, which went along with a new way of marketing the movie experience. Studios heavily invested in creating a more refined experience for movie goers, turning former nickelodeons and movie houses into "movie palaces" with ornate decor. Located in bustling downtowns and near shopping centers, these new movie houses were not attempting to alienate working-class audiences; rather, they were trying to entice them to be part of the upper-class experience. They became what Jeffrey Klenotic calls "temples of a new classlessness," attracting a large audience that would enjoy being treated to a quasi-upper-class experience.[15] Workers at movie palaces were instructed to treat all customers the same, not speaking for too long with one so as not to make another feel slighted.

Gustave Le Bon, one of the earliest scholars of crowd psychology, saw this kind of experience as strikingly different, possibly dangerous, but also as a useful tool of control. He claimed we were entering the "Era of the Crowds," and that governments should take heed and use movie theaters as a primary means of reaching the public. He argued in the early twenties that government control of both filmmaking and ownership of theaters was one way to prevent the crowds from destroying long-standing traditions.[16] Crowds were moved by leaders, and in order to capitalize on this, governments needed to step in ahead of others who might sway the minds of the people.[17] Interestingly, though the American government did not step in to control the film industry outright, other countries did take Le Bon up on this suggestion. Both communist and fascist government leaders cited him as they constructed propaganda campaigns and succeeded in taking over film production.[18]

The terminology surrounding audiences begins to change with the growing reliance on crowd psychology to explain behavior. Le Bon, along with others, claimed that certain racial groups were more susceptible to a crowd mentality. The term "public" and its association with rationally thinking citizens becomes almost replaced by the idea of this terrible crowd in discussions of groups of people assembled for both entertain-

ment and political purpose. Publications both in and outside academia, such as *Harvard Monthly* and *The Nation*, argued that crowds of consensus and ignorant voters swayed by "political adventurers" were becoming a monkey wrench in democratic politics.[19]

Film Audiences and the Hays Code

By the time films started to be produced with sound, there were formal industry attempts to manage the crowds that flock to them. The Hays Code, also known as the Production Code, was a standard of "good taste" for filmmakers, which read more like a list of dos and don'ts. Created in 1930, the Code reflects some of the fears of audiences prevalent at the time both in the movie industry and the country at large. The Great Depression had caused movie studios to struggle financially, and many of them turned to Wall Street banks as their primary investors. These investors were less concerned about the art form and more interested in profit. As such, the industry tightened its production and distribution schedule, resulting in what came to be known colloquially as the "Studio System." Hollywood studios started organizing every aspect of film production on a strict schedule. Screening, shooting, and editing was carried out on a more regular, cost-effective basis. This resulted in the great multitude of films produced during this era, but also the often generic quality of such films. Simplified genres in American film emerged during this era as a result of the factory system in place.

It is not surprising that an industry strongly affected by the financial woes of the Depression would seek to maintain a steady and dependable audience. When state, civic, and religious groups began to decry the lack of morals of films and Hollywood in general in the teens of the twentieth century, the studios brought in William H. Hays. Hays was already known as a republican reformer, and his efforts to create a board of review for films resulted in the Motion Picture Producers of America.[20] He was joined in 1930 by Jesuit priest Daniel Lord, who created the basis for the Code, outlining the major moral and ethical guidelines for stories in film. The list reflects fears over the impact of media on audiences. The preamble of the Code explains why the code was thought to be needed:

> [Motion picture producers] recognize their responsibility to the public because of this trust and because entertainment and art are important influences in the life of a nation … the motion picture within its own field of

> entertainment may be directly responsible for spiritual or moral progress, for higher types of social life, and for much correct thinking.

While the "general principles" of the code assume audience sympathy with morally questionable characters will lead to moral degeneracy: "No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin," was one such principle. "Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented," and "Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation," were others. [21] The itemized list was truly a list of fears of the audience, of the "masses:"

> The technique of murder must be presented in a way that will not inspire imitation.
>
> Theft, robbery, safe-cracking, and dynamiting of trains, mines, buildings, etc., should not be detailed in method.
>
> In general passion should so be treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser element.
>
> The use of the Flag shall be consistently respectful. [22]

The fear seemed to be that audiences would leave the movies and become thieves, murderers, fornicators, and traitors; that by viewing a film containing these messages, they would be encouraged or perhaps even compelled to incorporate them into their behavior. In the section entitled "Reasons Supporting the Preamble of the Code," the ideas of Matthew Arnold can be seen at play:

> Art can be morally good, lifting men to higher levels. This has been done through good music, great painting, authentic fiction, poetry, drama.
>
> Art can be morally evil in its effects. This is the case clearly enough with unclean art, indecent books, suggestive drama. The effect on the lives of men and women is obvious.

Art that seeks to live up to the mantra of "sweetness and light" is praised, and art that traverses what are considered negative ideas or emotions are cause for concern. Like Arnold, the crafters of the Code sought not just to manage audiences, but also to enlighten them. To raise cultural standards through censorship:

> the MORAL IMPORTANCE of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women and affects them closely; it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours; and ultimately touches the whole of their lives. A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work. So correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation. Wrong entertainment lowers the whole living conditions and moral ideals of a race.[23]

And all of these requirements was considered necessary because "it [had] become in an incredibly short period the art of the multitudes."

Obviously, today a great number of Americans go into movie theaters and are presented with uncensored violence. Even though profit was a powerful motive to keep highly successful films in the gangster genre in theaters in the 1930s, the fear over audience exposure to such films effectively shut down their production in 1935, when studios declared a moratorium on gangster films. Diminishing opportunities during the Depression, coupled with a national preoccupation with the breakdown of law and order, caused Americans to become fascinated with real-life gangsters such as Al Capone, who graced *Time Magazine* in 1930 in a photo reminiscent of a celebrity portrait in a Hollywood magazine. Capone's organization was often compared to an efficient corporation in the press. He was seen by many as a modern American success story, one of the only people who went from rags to riches during the country's darkest economic time.

How to deal with the criminal element in society was becoming important to social reformers. For groups such as the Eugenicists, science could provide information about the roots of criminality. Their approach signified a shift in perspectives on crime. Americans in the early-twentieth century teens and twenties had started to let go of some of the Victorian notions of rationality and the belief in rehabilitation. The new belief—promoted by social reformers like Eugenicists, but also by psychologists and politicians—centered on biological and environmental factors as causes of criminality. Criminals, it was argued, were created by forces outside their control. Eugenicists linked these forces to genetic traits and "defective breeding," arguing that certain races were naturally adept at criminal acts. But exposure to criminality in the form of entertainment was also seen as a factor in the rise in crime.[24] Gangster films, films in which the criminal is a central character and often the hero,

were naturally a target for this kind of thinking. The Production Code's enforcement in 1934 made it difficult for gangster films to operate on their previous formula; most notably, it was difficult to get around the following rules in the code:

> Treatment of crimes against the law must not:
>
> Teach methods of crime
> Inspire potential criminals with a desire for imitation
> Make criminals seem heroic or justified

Powerful groups like the Catholic Legion of Decency threatened Catholics with eternal damnation if they watched certain films. This caused the genre to go into decline in 1933, and by 1935 the studios had agreed to a moratorium on the films. The audience, it seems, was getting too much pleasure from them.

Gangster films did not go away, of course, but future incarnations of the films up until the 1960s tended to be heavy-handed condemnations of the gangster and his world.[25] There is little evidence that studies were done during this period connecting viewing films with individual acts of violence, but the specter of that possibility was there for those who believed in the value of the code. Well before television, fears of the audience as a large mass of people, easily influenced and unenlightened, had become institutionalized as part of media production. Even as groups of moviegoers such as the Catholic Legion of Decency protested the violence of gangster films, the idea persisted that moviegoers would not criticize but instead accept the values in films. It should come as no surprise that reformers in the 1950s sought to bring those ideas to the television audience.

The Boob in Front of the Tube: Television Audiences

The idea of the audience as participatory and discerning (and even politically active) that prevailed until the mid-nineteenth century no longer held sway by the mid-twentieth century. The mass production of media coincided with an idea about a mass audience, a teeming mass of people who, it was argued, were using popular culture as their moral guide. The American entertainment industry was now built around the idea that entertainment was expected to be (a) purchased rather than created, and

(b) experienced as a spectator. When television became popular, fears similar to those surrounding films resurfaced.

According to Cecilia Tichi's book *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture*, the early days of television were filled with curious excitement about the new technology, but also with fear over the effect it would have on viewers: "Television, it was claimed would totally destroy radio and movies, 'end the art of conversation' and bring domestic life to a 'standstill' and thus undermine the 'American way of life.'"[26] *Your Show of Shows*, a variety show that began in 1949, became so popular on Saturday evenings that people rushed home to watch, much to the disappointment of restaurateurs and movie theater owners who suffered distinct financial losses as a result. Erik Barnouw's account of this period in his work on television's history, *Tube of Plenty*, points to losses across the entertainment spectrum:

> Television had briefly drawn people to taverns, but now home sets kept them home. Cities saw a drop in taxicab receipts. Jukebox receipts were down. Public libraries, including the New York Public Library, reported a drop in book circulation, and many book stores reported sales down. Radio listening was off in television cities."[27]

Even more disturbing was the idea that this very intimate form of entertainment, right inside American living rooms, might become a threat to national security. Television scholars Cecilia Tichi and Lynn Spigel have both researched the early years of television in the United States. They found that television quickly took the place of the family hearth. Ads for televisions showed families gathered around the television set the way families had previously gathered around the hearth. Lynn Spigel noted that there were a great number of "family circle" ads that showed television at the center of a cozy family unit.[28] By contrast, images of people watching television alone were suspect, at times thought of as dangerous. It was important for television companies, networks, and the journalists who wrote about television etiquette to illustrate some of the pitfalls of watching alone. According to Tichi:

> Individual, private preferences in TV viewing are constructed to reinforce long-term values of American individualism, which extends from the eighteenth century Enlightenment and is a major part of the ideology of democratic America. Individualism, however, is as problematic in the TV era as

> it has been in the past, because individual self-assertion can set the viewer apart from, and at odds with, the family, partner, group, and so undermine the social symbolism of the electronic hearth.[29]

Women shown watching television alone in ads or cartoons were often shown avoiding housework (burning the ironing, letting the dishes pile up) while watching soap operas, while men were often shown gazing at beautiful actresses. This mitigated anxiety by reinforcing traditional stereotypes of gender (men interested in sexual fantasy, women interested in romance stories) into this very new experience. There was a great deal of fear surrounding lone viewing, especially for men, who were not often represented watching violence, gore, or even hard news programming. All of this was to further the idea that individualism would not go too far in this new television age, that the lone male viewer will "not become a murderous renegade individualist," but instead "the most domesticated of American men."[30] Spigel saw television as part of the political and cultural policy of "containment" during the Cold War.

Tichi also discusses the fears of too much television viewing circulating during the Cold War era, and argues that this is when we began to see television discussed as a kind of an addiction, or a drug. Viewers were described as being held hostage by the addictive power of the tube, and warned that if they stared too long, they would no longer be acting on their own. Cartoons in newspapers portrayed the viewer as a kind of zombie who has no preference about programming, but simply wants to be in the glow of the television's light at all times. Spigel noted that magazines were discussing the loss of self-control once television entered the home. Standards of etiquette doled out by magazines sought to make sure that families were not watching too much television, and that children especially were not avoiding homework while being lured in by the TV set.

Fears circulating over Soviet cultural and political infiltration were certainly a part of this recasting of television as a drug. Not only were viewers consistently shown and discussed as passive (the slang terms that developed for television viewers reiterated passivity: "couch potato, "boob tube"), their interpretive capabilities were often portrayed as simplistic at best. Cartoons and articles painted a picture of a mesmerized viewer, entranced and led by the images on the screen. Tichi quotes a journalist in the 1950s who argued that television "could become the worst cultural opiate in history." Such passive dupes may never develop free will. Whether the critic was a Marxist scholar or a communist-hating patriot, the televi-

sion viewer was as moldable as clay, ready to accept the messages of the programs that came into her or his living room and behave according to their dictates.[31] Spigel notes that more than being characterized as a drug, television was constantly compared to a disease. Magazine writers were concerned about the psychological damage TV viewing would bring, especially with children.

Just as in the film industry's early days, emerging television networks wanted to convince the public that they, too, were concerned about the power of television images on audiences at home. Broadcasters tried to respond to these concerns by forming the National Association of Radio and Television Broadcasters (NARTB). This trade association of the broadcast industry was a platform from which those fears could be addressed. The director of the NARTB claimed that there was a sense of fear among broadcasters about government censorship in the form of legislation that would regulate TV programming content. In response, a *Television Code of the National Association of Broadcasters* was published in March 1952 as a form of self-policing. The code also illustrates that censorship is predicated on the notion that it is in the public's best interest. Some of the code dealt with limiting advertising time, but programming content was also important. Several pages are devoted to regulations dealing with acceptability of program material, including such items as:

(o) The presentation of cruelty, greed and selfishness as worthy motivations is to be avoided.
(q) Criminality shall be presented as undesirable and unsympathetic.
(r) The presentation of techniques of crime in such detail as to invite imitation shall be avoided.
(s) The use of horror for its own sake will be eliminated
(t) Law enforcement shall be upheld, and the officers of the law are to be portrayed with respect and dignity.
(u) The presentation of murder or revenge as a motive for murder shall not be presented as justifiable.
(x) The appearance or dramatization of such persons featured in actual crime news will be permitted only in such light as to aid law enforcement or to report the news event.

The code reinforced notions that greed, cruelty, and selfishness were not worthy motivations, that crime was never acceptable or committed for good reason (and our laws are just), that television should not be used to educate people in negative behavior, that angering, shocking, or

offending the viewer served no purpose, and, that law enforcement was above reproach and not to be questioned or criticized. This, of course, worked directly against political dissenters and victims of law enforcement. Responsibility toward children was given special attention:

> Television is responsible for insuring that programs of all sorts which occur during the times of day when children may normally be expected to have the opportunity of viewing television shall exercise care in the following regards:
>
> (a) In affording opportunities for cultural growth as well as for wholesome entertainment.
> (b) In developing programs to foster and promote the commonly accepted moral, social, and ethical ideals characteristic of American life.
> (c) In reflecting respect for parents, for honorable behavior, and for the constituted authorities of the American community.
> (d) In eliminating reference to kidnapping of children or threats of kidnapping.
> (e) In avoiding material which is excessively violent or would create morbid suspense, or other undesirable reactions in children.
> (f) In exercising particular restraint and care in crime or mystery episodes involving children or minors.[32]

In part the television set was seen as an educator of the nation's youth, and so the Code contains within it a set of assumptions about children that came, eventually, to be applied to all viewers: that children are very impressionable; believe everything they see on television; must be instructed in American moral, social, and ethical ideals; and that they must be taught to trust and obey authority figures. It would seem as though the assumption of passivity is so total that it must be managed. And in Cold War America, this certainly was a part of furthering nationalistic cultural goals. Evidence of audiences breaking out of passive behaviors (joining fan groups, protesting stereotypical images) was almost always categorized as deviant.

Not all of the research on early television viewers conjures up images of passive dupes. However, most of the time those who are not depicted as passive are shown as ridiculous or dangerous. Because of the intimate nature of television viewing, the rules about being quiet that were reserved for movies and the theater were a bit more lax. Certainly there were rules of etiquette around television viewing, but emotional outbursts and loud cheering were not deemed inappropriate when watching your favorite programs. Tichi discusses this in her section on what she calls the "backtalking viewer." She notes that newspapers, cartoons, and maga-

zines were not just describing viewers as zombies. Sometimes they were incredibly impassioned, yelling during a sports program or arguing with candidates during a televised political debate. Often shown as comical and ridiculous, these viewers were often described as having fantastical conversations. That the behavior was widespread enough to be commented on, however, is telling. People still wanted to respond to their entertainers, to register their approval *and* disapproval.

In Mark Andrejevic's study of *Television Without Pity* in 2008, he found that many of his respondents were much like the "backtalking viewer." Though not characterized as comical or ridiculous as in the cartoons Tichi recalls, they were backtalking in that they were not criticizing programs with the intent to reach the ears of the creators. They were almost doing a sort of backtalking in the presence of others:

> *TWoP*pers esteem savvy, critical posts highly, and those who are active contributors to the site say that while they like the idea that producers may be paying attention, they post mainly for the benefit of fellow posters and the moderator. The goal is not so much to influence the group of producers and production assistants referred to in posts as TPTB (the powers that be) as it is to entertain and impress the *TWoP* community with wit, insight, and, above all, "snark."[33]

While not speaking to the television, the communal backtalk at the site was sometimes posited as ridiculous by television creators. A look at the conversations between *TWoP*ers and creators in the next few chapters illustrates that the image of the irate, ranting viewer was still alive and well during my study.

Violent Media and the Moral Panic of the 1990s

As we entered the 1990s, television and film were well-established institutions. Equally established were the numerous studies on their ability to instill violent behaviors in their audience. As discussed in Chap. 2, effects studies still held sway in the public debate over media's power over audiences. Even though the notion of the "resistant reader" is old news to academics, effects studies and the assumptions inherent within them are powerful in everyday discussions of media audiences even today. The fears surrounding films and television audiences not surprisingly transfer seamlessly to the newest media embraced by young audiences: video games.

And who better to defend them than Henry Jenkins, who moves from studying television fan culture to video game culture.

On April 20, 1999 Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris murdered fellow students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. In addition to Goth culture and metal music, video games were deemed part of the reason these two boys became killers. The evidence left behind indicated that the two used the video game *Doom* to construct scenarios they later used at their high school. In response, the parents of the Columbine victims sued the makers of the video game *Doom*. What happened at Columbine was shocking, but it was not an isolated incident of teen violence connected to popular media.

On June 7, 2003, 18-year-old Devin Moore was brought into a police station on suspicion of autotheft. As he was booked into the police station, he quickly commandeered the officer's gun, shot him in the head, and proceeded to leave the station, shooting another officer and a dispatcher on his way out the door. He stole a police cruiser and was later captured. The defense at his trial indicated that the scene was very reminiscent of the video game *Grand Theft Auto*. In *Grand Theft Auto*, the player is a street thug trying to take over the city. In one scenario, the player can enter a police precinct, steal a uniform, free a convict from jail, escape by shooting police, and flee in a squad car. After his capture, Moore was quoted as saying, "Life is like a video game. Everybody's got to die sometime." His defense centered on the strategy that *Grand Theft Auto* was partly culpable for his actions. Moore faced trial in 2005 and was convicted, eventually sentenced to death by lethal injection. The families of Moore's victims took legal action against Sony, Take Two Interactive, Wal-Mart, and GameStop for their part in the manufacture and distribution of *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*.[34]

Even more recently, in April 2007, when a Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University student went on a shooting rampage in Blacksburg, Virginia, and after the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, news coverage tended to support this ideology. Experts such as psychologist Dr Phil and conservative lawyer Jack Thompson were at the ready in interviews, with decades of research to support their notion of the connection between violent media and violent behavior.

A common criticism is that it is not just the violence presented to players that is culpable, but that players are encouraged and rewarded for committing acts of violence. Effects studies conducted since the 1980s have aimed to link video games to real world violence. Some have argued that

adolescents do not have the impulse control to differentiate between fantasy and reality; others have argued that playing the games triggers aggression levels. These are arguments about the power that our popular culture has over audiences, and the power we, as a culture, should be exerting over it when it crosses a certain line.

The vast majority of studies show a significant link between violence and media consumption. As mentioned previously, the American Psychological Association supports the overall findings of the earlier studies, arguing there is a real and dangerous link between violent media and real world violence. These stereotypes about video gamers as easily influenced and disconnected with reality are very similar to those surrounding *Star Trek* fans, so it is not surprising that Henry Jenkins started to look at how video games and gamers are treated by social critics, psychologists, and scared parents. His article, "Lessons from Littleton: What Congress Doesn't Want You to Hear about Youth and Media," came in the wake of the Columbine shootings. He was at the time, one of the few academics supporting gamers that testified at the Senate subcommittee hearing on the "marketing of violent entertainment to children."

Jenkins found that the debates displayed rhetoric consistent with the ongoing "culture war" that had been progressing in three phases: the first during the Reagan administration and focused on enshrining a "moral majority," the second during the Bush years that called into question "political correctness," and now a third aspect of the culture war rhetoric that sought to center around objective truth:

> In the third phase, the language of medicine and science displaces the rhetoric of morality. The shift toward a language of scientific objectivity has made it possible for a significant number of liberal democrats, such as Sen. Joseph Lieberman (D-Conn.) or Sen. Max Cleland (D-Georgia), to align themselves with conservative Republicans in calling for the regulation of media content.[35]

Jenkins argues that effects studies have become trusted and well funded over the past few decades because they offer something politicians and lawmakers love: simple solutions to complex problems. The central assumption here is of a passive audience. It is worth noting that even though most of my students are lifelong gamers and some found Jenkins' ideas about gamers valuable, many could not shake the notion that "other" gamers might not be as actively interpreting. It was those "other" media audiences

that might be dangerous. Just like some members of *Television Without Pity* that shun the term "fan" so as to not associate themselves with fan culture, culturally many have internalized the prevailing notion that people who are closely connected to popular media cannot gain proper distance, are easy to manipulate, and are not to be relied upon for truth.

Conclusion

The idea of an active, engaged audience as dangerous and frightening began in the nineteenth century and was enmeshed in the cultural shifts that altered accepted notions of class and nationalism. Immediate criticism and personal involvement in entertainment (both its creation and performance) became associated with "uncivilized" behavior, low-class forms of etiquette and unenlightened thinking. Indeed, as the tastemakers, academics and social critics began to distance themselves from popular entertainment, the assumption that audiences (often discussed as a teeming "mass") were dangerously susceptible to influence grew. Moral panics in the 1930s, 1950s, and 1990s escalated these fears into institutional entertainment policies that reified them year after year. It is no wonder that most fan behaviors are either ridiculed or seen as a cause for concern. Caring too much about media has been associated with degeneracy, violence, and cultural decline. Barriers, both cultural and physical, are kept in place between media creators and audience members. But those barriers start to crumble when the Internet becomes an important form of communication for viewers.

At the same time, advances in fan studies, from the "uses and gratifications" approach, through the "resistant reader" approach and beyond, helped reposition audiences (and particularly fan audiences) as critical rather than dangerous. *Television Without Pity* is a kind of participatory entertainment on par with those early theater audiences. It is considered new, but really it is a contemporary version of the sixteenth–early-nineteenth century audiences who expected their entertainment to meet their needs and voiced their opinions when it did not meet those expectations. This new approach to audience participation is an affront to the traditional system, and many established critics and some creators of TV programs view these new TV amateur critics as a nuisance, as idiots, as socially inept, and as potentially dangerous for the future of television. Though it acted as a censoring presence for television, the Television Code did contain within it one sentence in the preamble that I found very interesting: "In order that television programming may best serve the public interest, viewers should be encouraged

to make their criticisms and positive suggestions known to the television broadcasters."[36]

Notes

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4. Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750–1990*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 4.
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11. Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (London: Harvard University Press, 1988), 177.
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23. Gerald Mast (ed.), *The Movies in our Midst*, 216.
24. This sectioned is informed by Susan Currell's *Popular Eugenics: National Efficiency and American Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Ohio University Press, 2006) and Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet, Peter Stanfield's *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film* (Rutgers University Press, 2005).
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31. Cecilia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth*, 106–107.
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33. Andrejevic, Mark. "Watching Television Without Pity: The Productivity of Online Fans," *Television & New Media* v. 9, no. 1 (2008): 36.
34. I originally viewed the account of this shooting on an episode of *60 Minute*s in June 2005, but you can find their account summarized online: http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2005/03/04/60minutes/main678261.shtml [accessed January 2010].
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CHAPTER 3

"Give Pete a Line": Participatory Television and the *TWoP* Community

Television Without Pity was a space in early Internet history where fans interacted with television creators directly, and had some impact on the shows they cared about. It was a space for viewers to posit alternatives to canon storylines, and it provided a platform for members to teach each other the tools for cultural and aesthetic criticism. Using fan practices and "mainstreaming" them for widespread use, the community at *Television Without Pity* cultivated a particular kind of participatory culture, exploring television stories as shared cultural narratives. In doing so, members developed bonds of community, and, much like any fan culture, soon found themselves discussing their own lives, and even making plans to meet at group events called "*TWoP* Cons." This chapter explores those rituals and bonds through a case study of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Smallville* boards, where I found the best examples of collective intelligence and what could be characterized as very positive interactions with creators.

A Direct Line to the "Powers That Be"

Television Without Pity was massive, so any claims about "community" must be considered relative to the capabilities of any researcher to "know" what kinds of discussions were taking place. What I found in the better part of a decade of research was focused more on the bond between members and a sense of community than were other studies of the site. Journalistic reviews and academic discussions of the site seem to focus on

S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience*,
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the critical aspect of members, but I wanted to go further and examine how members interacted with one another.

Online discourse certainly influenced at least some of the character and story development on shows like *Buffy* and *Smallville*, shows that courted audience discussion online. And since both shows had creators with an eye on the community at *Television Without Pity*, I argue the site should be viewed as at least part of that online influence. Creators acknowledged reading the boards and recaps, and kept them in mind when writing new episodes.

When I began my study of the *Smallville* boards in 2006, the fall television season had not yet started, and many posters were discussing the problems they had with the previous season. *Smallville*, a series about the teenage adventures of Superman, was a new series with only one season under its belt, but evaluation of the romantic story arcs of its major characters and the quality of the previous season's villains dominated the topics.

The immediacy of Internet discourse and the high profile of *Television Without Pity* were not lost on the communities in the *Smallville* boards. I noticed early in my research that many of the site members would speak directly to producers, actors, and writers in their posts. It was not unusual to read a post directed at *Buffy* writer Jane Espensen that said "Great job, Jane," or one for Doug Petrie that said, "Doug Petrie, I love you!" Advice on casting was directed at the *Smallville* creative team that begged them to bring an actress back for more episodes, because, as one poster remarked: "she can actually act." *Television Without Pity* had been the subject of news articles and web news articles by the time I had begun studying the *Smallville* boards. It was not too presumptuous to assume that many of these posters knew that "the powers that be" at their shows were aware of their presence, and I interpreted many of these direct address posts as just that: directly addressing Al Gough, executive producer of *Smallville*, should he happen to stop by. In some message boards, the presence of people from the creative side of the program might be hinted at or merely rumored, but in these two boards, it was widely known that writers were reading because they had admitted to doing so in interviews. Al Gough went as far as to agree to an interview and share his experience with the *TWoP* recapper/moderator in charge of the *Smallville* boards. A closer look at the *Smallville* boards illustrates what can happen when creators step into conversation with their audience.

The *Smallville* Message Boards

The posters at *Television Without Pity* were, for the most part, well aware of television conventions, and often the bitterest criticism was reserved for stories that were deemed "unoriginal" or "typical" for television. The tendency of shows such as *Buffy*, *The X-Files*, and *Smallville* to have "evil substitute teachers" caused one poster to remark, "High school students, if you suddenly have a new teacher (especially if she's a hottie), run to your guidance counselor and take some other class." Villain archetypes aside, some elements of *Smallville* proved particularly distressing to the members of the message board. *Smallville* posters had been derisive about the portrayal of Pete Ross, the only actor of color on the show. Despite being Clark Kent's best friend, Pete was rarely on screen. In response, the community started a discussion topic with the humorous title "Can Somebody Spare Pete a Line?" The title was based on a post in the thread for the episode "Reaper" in 2002: "After all the hoopla and indignation over a black actor being cast as Pete Ross in *Smallville*, the poor guy is barely in the show. I thought he was Clark's 'best friend.' Hey Gough and Millar, what does it take to get this kid a line?"

During an interview with writer/producer Al Gough, a *TWoP* recapper brought up the concerns of the community, and Gough promised to make amends in the second season. Indeed, the following season featured a huge increase in lines for Pete, including a major story arc for his character.[1] It was viewed as quite the remarkable feat that the recapper and moderator for the *Smallville* boards got to interview Gough, but as soon as the interview began, Gough related that he was already a fan of *Television Without Pity*, saying to Omar:

> I love your site, by the way. I think your synopses of the shows are hysterical. I was talking to the president of Warner's television. I was relaying to him that I surf the websites after episodes, and telling him about the site. [chuckles] They're very funny and you have very good nicknames.[2]

This type of connection to audiences changed some staid traditions at the networks moving into the early 2000s. Interviews with television creators by scholars in the past reinforced the idea that most writers went by their own cultural hunches because the pace and workload for each episode was too huge to do much research about perspectives outside of their experience. Scholar Richard Butsch's study of television production noted that

writers tend to use their own "cultural hunches" when writing for characters with whom they have few real world connections.[3] Web discourse created a venue for research (quick research at that) for the writer. Moreover, not doing due diligence as a writer began to be quickly sensationalized by the new bulk of critics working together in large communities such as *Television Without Pity*. Pete's push to the forefront in *Smallville*'s second season was considered by many in the *Television Without Pity* community as a direct response to their needs, and with each passing episode that season, connections were made between their conversations and the *Smallville* storylines that were difficult to deny.

The *Smallville* message board at *TWoP* had some characteristics that were different from most other *Smallville* message boards you would have found online. It was even a little different from other boards for programs at *TWoP*. In addition to a lengthy FAQ page, the members of the site created an entire web page to expand on the dynamics of the *Smallville* board. The *Smallville Newbie Guide* webpage indicated that at the *Television Without Pity Smallville* boards, members enjoyed discussing homoerotic subtext, especially between Lex Luthor and Clark Kent. They informed new posters that if they did not like hearing about "Clex" (their short-cut phrase, or smoosh, for "a Clark/Lex romance"), they should go to the *Smallville News* or *Kryptonite* message boards. It appears that though they welcomed differing opinions, they wanted newcomers to recognize that they already had a community in place with an extant consensus on certain elements. The homoerotic subtext between Clark and Lex had been commented upon since the beginning of the first season at *TWoP*, and since the message boards and creator Al Gough sometimes read recaps, the subject came up in the interview conducted with Gough by *Smallville* recapper/moderator Omar G.

Gough claimed, "it's really not supposed to be homoerotic at all," but also mentioned that he and his partner, *Smallville* producer Miles Millar, were "two guys who made their careers on buddy movies. Buddy movies are love stories with two guys who carry guns." In the second season, after Omar G's interview, Gough and/or the creative team at *Smallville* made the subtext between Clark and Lex even more noticeable, and provided dialogue and props that the *Television Without Pity* community has regarded as "shout-outs"[4] aimed directly at the *Smallville* boards.

The second episode of the second season was considered an overt shout-out to Omar G and the posters at the *Smallville* boards at *Television Without Pity*. Omar G's recap for the episode titled "Heat" started out

with: "Somebody from the *WB* must have a bug installed in our forums because damned if this episode isn't exactly like the kind of talk that goes on in there." Indeed, an episode that was ostensibly about a heterosexual wedding and heterosexual attraction had many moments of gay subtext, dealt with through the episode's constant sexual innuendos and comedic references to Clark's emergent sexuality. The dialogue between Lex and Clark led many posters to write comments like, "That episode was gayer than I am," or "For all the worry that this particular episode was going to become a testament to all things straight in *Smallville*, astonishingly it ends up being exactly the opposite in a big way." In addition to sub-textual dialogue, many posters also noticed an altered prop. One poster wrote, "Gotta love that the windmill in the Kent's yard is now painted rainbow colors! Go gay pride!"

Sub-textual shout outs like these were celebrated as evidence of the *TWoP* community's direct influence. Some, however, tempered their celebration. While they were happy to be validated in some way by the producers, there was an undercurrent of disappointment. The fact that the text was "sub" indicates that it was not foreshadowing, but some kind of "secret text" that could not become possible as an overt narrative in the series. In and of themselves, the props, dialogue, and facial expressions could be interpreted a number of ways, and seem to be vague enough (that is, not heavily remarked upon or pointed out to the viewer) that an audience without knowledge of the popularity of "Clex" would not have felt left out of some important element of the plot. One member wrote, "I love the high-five from Gough and Millar, but I won't rest until I get an on-screen kiss. Let them smooch!" Sub-textual shout outs are perhaps the simplest way for writers to appease a core (or cult) audience without alienating the mainstream demographic that most networks aim to please. Though the more vocal members of the community celebrated the gay subtext on Smallville, it was seen as somewhat patronizing in that the "real" story did not (and never would) reflect a homosexual relationship between Clark and Lex, no matter how much a quality critical community desired such a relationship.

Within fan culture, there is a long history of slash fiction, and shipping characters into gay and lesbian romances.[5] For some, playing with the characters in fan fiction is enough, and the canonical text is not expected (or desired) to change. There were certainly members of the *TWoP Smallville* community that would be part of that category. However, some very vocal members *did* want to see Clex in the text. Finding spaces where

slash scenes could become inserted in each episode was part of the discussion each week.

The ability of the *Television Without Pity* community to effect change had its limits, and this desire for a Clark/Lex romance is probably most indicative of where the line was drawn. The homoerotic aspects of the show dominated almost every topic on the boards, and yet discussions as to whether Clark Kent and Lex Luthor could have ever been a gay couple in the "real" text were cut short after posters realized (and shared with each other) that the DC Comics contract with the WB network was restrictive about certain elements of the Superman canon. Furthermore, some posters did not trust *Smallville* to do justice to a Clark/Lex romance, such as one member, who wrote "I'd rather [it] stay out of their control, otherwise they'd probably manage to make it as dull and forced as the Clark/Lana relationship." Some were knowledgeable about fan fiction narratives that feature Clark/Lex romance, and pointed out that the episode was like many of the fan fiction stories written and discussed by members of the boards. After another episode entitled "Red," one member wrote, "Gough and Millar? Stop ripping off ideas from the fora," and another wrote, "The writers plagiarized some fanfic for that whole scene between Clark and Lex."

Though it was evident that the *Television Without Pity* community had a somewhat traceable effect on the writers of their shows, elements such as these point to a dark side of the fan/viewer–producer relationship; one where writers used the boards to mine for creative storylines. At *Television Without Pity*, according to Sarah Bunting, a user held the copyright to their posts, and as such could take legal action if they suspected ideas had been plagiarized. Fan fiction writers with their own websites and those who posted on network "official" message boards may not have been afforded the same protection at that time.

Even though they may have known about those protections, fans, particularly those who wrote and read slash fiction, likely did not consider their fan fiction works up for sale to the creators of *Smallville*. Abigail DeKosnik writes that, "over the past decades of sharing their transformative works, fan fiction readers and writers have generally felt wary of commodifying a form of cultural production that is essentially derivative and perhaps subject to copyright infringement lawsuits." She points to Karen Hellekson's discussion of the fan "gift economy," in which fans tend to produce works not for money, but as gifts or contributions to their community.[6]

The tendency of television writers to mine message boards for fan opinion in both overt and covert ways increased over the course of my study. Most major networks began to create message boards of their own, targeting a young, tech-savvy audience. Some newspapers and websites had been reporting about this trend, discussing *Television Without Pity* in particular. This caught the attention of site members immediately. When I began this project, there was a small topic in a miscellaneous section that was for those interested in discussing these stories. That topic, along with the "*Buffy* in the Media" and "*Smallville* in the Media" threads, grew exponentially after two articles were published in the *New York Times Magazine* and *The Washington Post*. In these articles, writers from shows such as *Alias*, *E.R.*, *The Sopranos*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* commented on their use of *Television Without Pity* as a barometer for viewer opinion. Most TV writers remarked that the site's criticism was rather harsh but sincere, and that they sometimes changed the projected arc of a story to address complaints found in the message boards. News of the articles circulated through the *TWoP* community, and discussion about their own effect on the industry began. One poster wrote, "Hey, I'm just happy to snark on the shows I love/hate; I don't need to change them. But it's cool that this place has the power!" Another wrote, "Hell, the networks should be subsidizing *TWoP* as a source of unbiased viewer information." The articles brought this aspect of the site to the attention of newer members, who were perhaps unaware of their own impact, while validating the suspicions of older members that the powers-that-be were lurking and taking notes. More TV creators began discussing their forays into the site, such as *Veronica Mars* executive producer Rob Thomas.

Rob Thomas had originally planned for *Veronica Mars* to have a distinctly serial structure, requiring viewers to keep up with each episode to understand the forward movement of the mystery. After its second season, *Veronica Mars* transitioned to a semi-serial structure, with each episode having stand-alone elements that would allow new viewers to enter at any time in the season. He credits his network head, Dawn Ostroff, and the *Television Without Pity Veronica Mars* forum participants with helping him to realize that the serial structure had been a bit confusing to viewers.[7] In an interview with *TWoP* writer/recapper Couch Baron, Thomas pointed out that he had been reading the posts for a while: "Oh, yeah. I don't read every single post, but I read a lot of them," he said. In addition to reading, he was also posting. Though he posted often, he saw the site primarily as, in his words, "a big focus group." So although he saw himself

as connected to viewers via *Television Without Pity*, he did not really see himself as a member of the community. In fact, after visiting the site during the second season, he found the experience to be "like being in a room with a thousand ex-girlfriends."[8]

While heading up the creative team behind *Alias*, J.J. Abrams considered the site to be "an integral part of the process" of understanding his audience. He argues that because of web criticism in places like message boards, television had more of a connection to theater than to movies, "Movies are a done deal—there's no give and take—but in a play, you listen to the applause, the missing laughs, the boos. It's the same with the Internet." He further argued, "If you ignore that sort of response, you probably shouldn't be working in TV right now."[9]

This separated him from most showrunners, who saw these sites as fringe spaces, much like *Star Trek* fan clubs. Hart Hanson, showrunner for the crime procedural *Bones* recalled in the recent documentary *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show* that this kind of audience should be ignored. He argued that "99 percent" of the viewership has no idea who he is, and that people like his father, who thinks of Hart's main character, Temperance Brennan, like a real person, are the target audience.

> That's the audience—those people who don't know how the soup is made. And there's a small—very small portion of the audience that thinks they know how the soup is made and give you advice on how much salt to put in. And I think they should be ignored, because they're not—not that they're stupid or anything, some of them are stupid, some of them are very smart, but they should be ignored because they're not your audience.[10]

In this and many other ways, *Television Without Pity* before the Bravo takeover was unique. It was not exactly a fan site, where posters who were exclusively critical were often ousted. Nor was it an e-magazine or blog, where message boards took a backseat to articles and interviews. It incorporated advertising, community discussion, television criticism, interviews and recaps in a way that no other website provided in the early years of its popularity. It is the coming together of these elements that allowed it to function more actively in the cultural landscape. Because it was not an exclusive "fan" site, some TV writers were willing to take it more seriously, and because it was critical, humorous, and full of engaging content, fans and viewers who would not normally associate with fandom flocked to it. The site was part of a newly emerging relationship in which fans had

more access to the creative process. This interactivity allowed viewers to become more invested in the creation of media stories rather than seeing themselves as primarily consumers or passive recipients.

Collective Intelligence

Some members at *Television Without Pity* were well versed in academic and journalistic forms of criticism. Some of them were graduate students in media studies programs. Others were long-time film buffs, and readers of books on film criticism. There were older members who had been watching television (and actively interpreting it) for decades, and media fans who had been deconstructing TV shows and creating their own fiction works. And still others were fiction writers and readers who understood story structure. These forms of expertise were just the tip of the iceberg in a community with over 2 million unique visitors. Though there was some feeling of competition over putting forth the most relevant, cogent analysis of a program or storyline on the boards, there were also many instances where members helped educate each other on terms and forms of analysis. If you spent enough time on some of the boards at *Television Without Pity* you could have learned many of the tools of the critical trade. These moments of shared information are a form of what Henry Jenkins calls "collective intelligence." Fan studies, and Jenkins' work in particular, is very helpful in explaining some of the processes that were in the beginning stages at *Television Without Pity*. Jenkins argues Pierre Levy was the first to explore this phenomenon online:

> people harness their individual expertise toward shared goals and objectives … collective intelligence refers to this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively.[11]

This kind of communal, collaborative work was something Jenkins saw as potentially transformative. "Imagine the kinds of information these fans could collect," he argued, "if they sought to spoil the government rather than the networks." He was a bit doubtful about this possibility because of the ways in which Americans are socialized to think about politics and political speech. He argued that "one reason more Americans do not participate in public debates is that our normal ways of thinking and talking about politics requires us to buy into … the expert paradigm," which asks

us not to think about politics, but instead to find representatives who will do our thinking for us (whether it be law makers or pundits on TV programs).

This, he argues, is why political discussions surrounding media texts are so prevalent, but also why they are ignored or thought of as not "really" about politics. Discussions of media texts are considered unserious, and more of a way to extend entertainment. But the underlying thesis of both *Textual Poachers* and *Convergence Culture* is that this kind of play with media texts is just as serious as it is playful. He argues that "play is one of the ways we learn, and during a period of reskilling and reorientation, such play may be much more important than it seems at first glance," because "the skills we acquire through play may have implications for how we learn, work, participate in the political process, and connect with other people around the world." [12] I decided at the outset of this study to examine what I thought were amateur critics, not realizing that the skills and knowledge they brought to discussion were not unlike those I was learning about in my graduate coursework.

Television Without Pity members use and explain critical terms often. They use supportive statements and sometimes quote specific theorists or authors. In the *Buffy* threads alone, members were instructing each other on themes from previous seasons, the purpose and narrative style of a season premiere episode, who created promotional commercials for programs, theories relating to gender, feminism, and the basics of the horror genre. They discussed how pacing works on television differently from literature or film. Many of my interviewees related that going to *Television Without Pity* allowed them to hone their analytical skills in ways they probably would not have by simply watching alone. The discussions on the boards are peppered with statements like "I never would have caught that without coming here," or "this changes my whole perspective on this character." Seeing others' perspectives allowed some members insight they would not have otherwise had.

The site's popularity garnered it a few interviews with creators at different programs, and in these interviews, even more industry knowledge was circulated. A 2007 interview with executive producer Rob Thomas of *Veronica Mars*, for instance, included information on how television programs plot out their season, what factors (including network politics and budgets) impact a storyline, and how they negotiated character arcs in the writers' room. Thomas's interview in particular emphasized his use of noir style in creating a central character with flaws and shades of gray. All of this becomes part of the analyses put forth by members.

A lot of the discussion on the boards was a lot like "shop talk" from industry insiders (or those close to them) who revealed aspects of creating the TV text that most viewers would not likely have known about. On the *Veronica Mars* board, a member revealed that an actress's tired appearance was not necessarily a design of the narrative, but a result of her having worked through the previous night and day on a shoot for another project. On several boards, I found members discussing how promotional teasers for programs were often misleading. Members explained that promotional ads are made by marketing departments at networks to attract viewers, not show writers who care about accurately representing the story. And, almost every board discussed which writers were in charge of the episode's narrative, comparing their work with other writers throughout the seasons.

There were also instructive posts to new board members from older board members, who explained what the various acronyms and Internet speak mean. "YMMV" meant "your mileage may vary" which was used by *TWoP* members to indicate that their interpretation was just one of many, and another may find different conclusions. "ITA" means "I totally agree," which was used at the beginning of follow-up posts. Moderators, recappers and site administrators also stepped into the discussion, adding their own expertise.

Members, of course, brought their own education and experiences to the group. One topic, "Literary Antecedents in the Buffyverse" was peppered with comments such as this one: "I'm really looking forward to this topic since I have nowhere else to peddle my English degrees." A member in the *Buffy* episode threads found connections between her graduate work on gender and the *Buffy* character and introduced Judith Butler's theory of performativity:

> Judith Butler has written quite a bit on what she calls the "performative aspect of gendering." She borrows the term "performative" from J.L. Austin's definition. Austin defines a performative as a semiotic gesture that is a being as well as a doing—a doing that constitutes a being, an activity that creates what it describes. A performative does not simply communicate information. For instance, if I say, "My name is Donna," I am merely communicating information. But when I was *named* Donna, the utterance that one of my parents likely made, "I name her Donna," or some such, is a performative. In a really pared-down nutshell, Butler suggests that bodies are inherently gender indeterminate and that gendering is a performative act—when I was born, the doctor presumably said, "It's a girl!" And thus, I was a girl.

> According to Butler, what **Set** describes—"girls are emotional and shit," for example—is yet another performative, and because I have already received the assignment of "girl," I seek to fulfill my assigned role of girl by being emotional and shit. If I fail to be emotional, I'll be "unnatural," you know?

She continued to elaborate on Butler's ideas and concluded with:

> What does this have to do with Buffy? Well, everything, IMO [in my opinion]. Buffy's always been about that disruption, and Buffy's discomfort with it. Consider the line from the end of *Halloween*, "I just wanted to be a real girl for once." The "real girl" she became was, of course, soft and weak and in need of constant rescuing.

Some members were uncomfortable with Butler's ideas about gender. But, rather than "agreeing to disagree" or explaining why the opposing opinion is wrong, the discussion went a different way. A member posted a series of questions instead of a rebuttal:

> I guess it is a nature vs. nurture question. Do you believe that having girl parts makes you a girl child? Can you have girl parts and act like a boy? And what if the Dr. mislabeled you because your clitoris was elongated? What if DNA sampling was done and you had three sex chromosomes? And, what does acting like a girl really mean?

The member who had originally posted about Butler continued by responding to other members' questions:

> Gender, according to Butler, is not a binary system. It's a continuum. Now this doesn't mean that male/female are useless categories—notice that I'm calling Butler a "she" and Jack a "he," even though he may not be a "he." I'm just explaining a process of questioning what elements of sex and gender are truly biologically deterministic, and which are constructs.

This greatly contributed to the analysis of the program, with other members chiming in about how gender identity was something they had not adequately thought to question. Another member also pointed out that their assumptions about gender complicated their original assessment that Buffy was not emotional enough about her attempted rape in the sixth season:

> Wow, interesting stuff. And particularly this last bit, since it makes me wonder how much of our thoughts on how Buffy "should" be reacting

> to her assault are informed by notions of how a person, a woman in particular, is "supposed" to react to such a thing, and whether that assumed reaction is performative. (If I am understanding the term.) As if there is some sort of guide book telling one the appropriate amount of tears and self-flagellation that must accompany an assault of that nature, and that Buffy is somehow "getting it wrong" by not acting as traumatized as our expectations demand.

This discussion, not surprisingly, became a personal one, with members revealing their own experiences with abuse. One member educated the community with a post about how real abuse victims deal with trauma:

> If anything, she seems *not* to have reacted to it, somehow postponing any emotional aftermath "until later." In some cases, this tactic works, and "later" never comes, with the passing of time the trauma gets farther and farther away. If she never saw Spike again, if he died somewhere, she could happily ignore the event.

A member responded to this with, "I hope it works,' cause this is my own personal strategy on how to cope with child abuse," bringing to light that *Buffy*'s portrayal may indeed be one based on realistic reactions to abuse. Yet another board member revealed sexual abuse in her/his past and discussed the internalized guilt that went along with it in the context of Buffy's assault:

> Would it be equally problematic to hold any other abuse victim, female or male, to my (possibly not remotely sane) standard and tell her/him to "quit whining and get over it" just because I did?

In this instance, the expertise of another member not only brought to light another way of analyzing *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, it also prompted a member to re-examine what elements of one's personal history create assumptions in one's analysis.

The collective intelligence at *Television Without Pity* made for a more complex critical environment. Rather than being intimidated by or simply shutting out academic language or industry jargon, members seem to (for the most part) crave explanations and test the theories against their shows. Moreover, discussions such as these did transition into discussions about their own personal experiences. Though the site administrators were adamant about *TWoP* being about television and not personal experience,

they could not do so once the boards became little communities of people sharing their lives. They eventually had to allow larger and larger space for people to talk to each other about each other.

Personal Connections

Back when *Television Without Pity* was *Mighty Big TV*, before the name change in 1999, there had been one thread called "Off Topic Blather" that served the purpose of allowing members to talk about something other than television. Naming it "blather" was a clear indication that it was somehow not as important as the other topics, but as the site grew, these spaces were sought out and created by members. The "smaller" boards, about shows that were less popular (where there were fewer posts), tended to veer off onto personal everyday experiences. One of my interviewees pointed out that these boards could often be the most fun spaces because they were more personal: "you get a mix of direct comments on a show, or random associations, or miscellaneous updates." Eventually, the site's administrators conceded defeat on the issue and created spaces in each television program forum called "Meet Markets" where members could introduce themselves and get to know each other better. A lot of my interviewees and survey respondents mentioned the community feeling there was positive after the creation of the Meet Markets. One interviewee remarked, "*TWOP*ers are very considerate, when someone mentions something going on in their own life, other folks are quick to chime in and offer support." Another mentioned that talking about topics other than television was natural for groups of "like-minded" people. In a 2002 article for the *Washington Post* about *TWoP*, journalist Barbara Martinez remarked that "the little website doesn't sound like much to build a community around, but loyal users insist it is." She interviewed members about the "Off Topic Blather" and "Meet Market" boards. One argued "It was another site in itself," where members could talk about "relationships, food, cooking, our pets … I think this was the first time I was willing to talk about myself outside of TV just because it is fairly established that people here are intelligent, reasonable people."[13] These areas of *TWoP* were not often discussed by academics and journalists. They tended to visit episode threads and focus on the criticism going on there, but the need to talk about life outside television and make personal connections was strong.

As these communities of viewers grew larger, they sought ways to meet each other in person. These were coordinated in the Meet Markets but

eventually meets were exclusive to the "*TWoP* Cons" board. Borrowing from fan culture, members held "conventions," which were generally less structured than fan conventions and more like informal gatherings. They invited community members at large, but there were conventions themed around viewers for specific programs. Before I sought to document the site for academic research, I attended one of these conventions. I also attended a gathering during my early graduate work in ethnography. My experience, as well as community experiences discussed with interviewees and on the site, shed light on the kind of personal connections made through *Television Without Pity*.

Organizing a *TWoP* Con was fairly simple. Someone would post about a possible future meeting date and members would chime in with responses:

> Off/On topic, it feels like there hasn't been a good ol' fashioned generic TWoPcon' round these parts in a LOOOONG time. Non-show-specific, just a bunch of no-good television worshippers getting into bar fights, causing property damage, and running from the law. Who's up for it?
>
> Me me *me!!!!!!* I love bar fights and have the pirate scar to prove it! I'm not a big poster either, but I would love to snark with some like-minded people and do some property damage.
>
> I would be so so down for a general TWoPcon. good people, good drinks, bad TV.

General meetings were usually regional, and there were boards for those regions to make their plans. The "*TWOP* Cons" thread had over 90 sub-threads for areas as broad as "Northern California" or specific as "Montgomery, Alabama." There were a few for conventions outside the United States, such as the "Scotland" and "Australia" threads. Members who had never been to a convention would often ask about what went on there and what was expected of attendees. Others would then relate about their past experiences. One posted, "Don't worry, we're all (relatively) normal! It's not like we'll all be talking about only one show or anything—hell, if my memory serves me right I spent my first *TWoP*Con talking about lots of things totally non-TV-related," and another, "It's good times, good people, and surprisingly little TV-talk. Although that's welcome too." Most regions had different demographic makeups. During one planning discussion, a male poster asked if he would be the only man in attendance, and other male members came forward to reassure him: "I'm a guy. I think the vast majority of posters on this site are women, so it makes sense that most of the partygoers at a *TWoP*Con would be

women, but if you and I show up, there will be at least two guys." Another responded with "I used to go to the Dallas cons when I lived in Texas, and we had a fairly even gender mix, although the women did always outnumber the men when there was a difference."

Both of the conventions I attended in Los Angeles were evenly mixed, gender-wise. The first one was smaller, consisting of about ten people at a local restaurant; the second had about 20 attendees. The two experiences were not dissimilar. At both events we went about introducing ourselves, discussed the boards in which we spent the most of our time, and compared our personal pronunciations of the acronym "*TWoP*." Some went with "tee-wop" and others preferred "twop" (as would rhyme with "drop"). After people had a reference point from which to understand one another (their *TWoP* usernames), they would branch off into discussions of TV programs that were much like the ones taking place on the boards or they would talk about their personal lives.

The difference between these two events, for me, was that at one I was just a *TWoP*per, and at another I was also a researcher. There may have been some academic curiosity percolating at the time of that first convention, but the second was part of an assignment for a course on ethnography and I was attempting to take notes on the occasion. I was less observant at the first event, but I was also more relaxed. Interestingly, I listened better at the first event even though at the second I listened to more people. At both meetings I discussed being a graduate student, studying culture, hoping to focus on television for my academic career. There were other people at the events that had made television part of their professional lives, and students from a variety of fields. I am typically rather reserved in these types of situations, so at both meetings I tended to speak one-on-one rather than in big groups. At the second meeting, however, I barely spoke. Even though I had seen a couple of the attendees at the previous meeting and had known some of the members from the boards, I still found myself thinking that my identity as researcher was getting in the way of actually participating. I felt that any question I might bring to the discussion would be leading it in a direction it would not naturally go, or that by being a researcher I was not being my 'true' self (whatever that is). By the end of the evening, I had thrown off any attempt at documenting the experience and decided to analyze and interpret it afterwards. Participant-observation was hard work, and I felt I did neither justice when I tried to do both.

What I gathered from both events was that this was not unlike meeting up with new co-workers or classmates for a round of drinks. Sure,

we had this connection (work, class, *TWoP*) that brought us together, but we needed more than that to enjoy each other's company. We talked about television, but it seemed to me that these were people who would have talked about television with anyone, not just members of their *TWoP* circle. Like many people, television was just one of the elements of daily life that was discussion fodder for a gathering of people. The extent to which deeply analyzing television was part of our lives was the difference.

From interviews and discussions on *TWoP*, I gathered that the most well-attended conventions tended to be in New York City. Site co-founder Sarah Bunting and several recappers lived close enough to join some of these events. One post in the *TWoP* Con- NY forum showed the informal nature of their events:

> In the past, we've had afternoon picnic-type Cons in Central Park, and we've had evening Cons at various bars, and both have been fun. Why not combine them? We could meet in a park (doesn't necessarily have to be Central … I know ages ago Washington Square was floated around as a suggestion and for selfish reasons, I wouldn't mind Tompkins Square) first for a picnic-type deal, then go to a nearby pub for a few drinks from there.

Some of these meetings created long-lasting friendships. One of my interviewees mentioned that she became friends with a fellow *TWoP*per after a convention and was able to stay at her apartment when she came to visit months later. There were also couples who met at conventions, including one couple who eventually married:

> I believe there's something to celebrate, as you know … Member01 and Member 02 got married today. Where did they meet? That's right. TWoPCon NYC!

The *TWoP* Cons boards were not just for arranging large gatherings, they were also ways members could support the site's administrators and each other in small ways. Members would alert each other when small groups were meeting at concerts ("If anyone is interested, there will be some *TWoP*pers at CBGBs tonight"), or when members were performing at venues around town:

> It says on [recapper] Miss Alli's website that she will be doing a reading in New York City the night of March 18. I don't have any details, but hope they will be forthcoming. At any rate, I know I plan to be there, wherever

> the reading will be. Once we have the details, perhaps a TWoPCon in that general vicinity is in order?
>
> Just wanted to say I had a great time at KGB tonight. It was nice to see Sars again (though I remembered to ask how she liked Brooklyn, I forgot to ask if she was looking forward to the new Coen brothers movie), and to meet Miss Alli, Djb, and of course the person responsible for this, member123. And also see the NYC WingNuts [*West Wing* fans] who came. For those who missed it, Djb read excerpts from his unfinished "Monica: The Musical," Sars read from two of her essays, and Miss Alli read from her recap. A good time was had by all.
>
> Just chiming in with some more love of all things (and people) TWoP tonight, at KGB. It was the first time I've actually had a "real" (as opposed to "virtual") TWoP experience, and it was great!
>
> I enjoyed sitting at the table with all the lurkers (hi lurkers, come out to play!). I was very proud of how funny all the writers were in person. It's another talent entirely to be able to say your written words aloud and have them still be funny, and they were all up to the task. Sars' first piece was also very touching.

There was a good deal of organizing meetings around events where site administrators or recappers were discussing television. One panel discussion at the Museum of Television and Radio was a meeting of the academic, popular critic, and amateur critic worlds. The "Cheap Shots and Guilty Pleasure: Television in the Age of Irony" panel moderated by a professor posters seem to have forgotten, consisted of *Television Without Pity* founders Tara Ariano and Sarah Bunting, *Salon.com* columnist Cintra Wilson, and *New York Times* television critic Virginia Heffernan. A member who found out about the event posted information about it in the *TWoP*Cons thread, including the extended description of the purpose of the panel:

> In a bewildering television universe of spurious reality programs, youth-baiting soap operas, gruesome forensic dramas, and rampant postmodernism, a clear, sensible voice is needed to make sense of it all. More often than not, that voice is an extremely sarcastic one. A new generation of cultural commentators is exploring the audience's increasingly complicated relationship with television, employing both sardonic distance and giddy identification to analyze, ridicule, celebrate, and question the programs we love and, simultaneously, sort of hate. We have gathered some of these brave new voices in the wilderness to discuss this phenomenon and related topics, including the role of the Internet in fostering critical communities; the "meta" trend in hip shows such as The O.C.; the "so bad it's good"

> syndrome and its discontents; reality programming and the culture of schadenfreude; and the canon of awful/wonderful shows.

The term "fostering critical communities" was seen as about the community at *Television Without Pity*, which made the event attractive to some members, for others it was a chance to see their favorite recappers in person. For still others it was another way to meet with fellow members. The panel discussion was only one part of the event, dinner before and drinks afterward were had by some attendees. Afterwards, the thread members discussed not only the good time had, but the content of the discussion as well:

> To briefly recap the event itself; It was an almost packed house. They talked about TV in their lives growing up, the advantages of writing for the Internet, whether or not there was a feminine influence in writing about it, and of course, reality TV; was it achieving even its stated purpose, the difference between regular reality TV and celebrity reality TV, and so on. Sars and Wing, of course, were smart and funny, and would finish each others thoughts or trade off who would say what.

This was not the first panel discussion *TWoP*pers had attended. One mentioned that site co-founder Sarah Bunting had spoken at another panel and sought to compare the two events:

> The big difference between this time and the last time Sars appeared at the Museum for a panel discussion is this time, they let the audience ask questions. Almost all of the questions dealt in some way with the relationship between themselves and the TV-watching audience, or between the show and the audience, like why shows like *Arrested Development* were hits with critics but not with audiences, or whether the rise of reality shows led to the rise of news magazine shows, or whether fans made a difference in what TV shows did, or whether there was as big a gap between themselves and the TV audience as there seems to be between movie critics and the movie audience (that last question was mine).

Other members found that the panel did not go deep enough in terms of discussing irony:

> Again, I would have liked the moderator to go somewhat deeper (for an evening devoted to irony, we didn't really talk about it directly as a concept, instead dealing on a show-to-show basis), as I'm sure the panelists would have been up for it, but it was still an enjoyable evening.

Members were sure to rate the performances of the participants, but also shared what it was like to meet other members:

> I thought everyone on the panel was up for the evening, thoughtful and witty. The mod was a little unpracticed at negotiating a less academic panel than that to which he was accustomed (or so it seemed to me), but he did prove by some comments that he's a guy that's seen some TV.
>
> Virginia noted that she was less snarky than the others on the panel, and she struck me as a sensitive soul. One therefore wonders how she survives straddling the TV and journalism worlds, neither known for nurture.
>
> One of the audience questioners mentioned that going to the site is something you do alone, and it's surprising and great when you come across live people that do too. It's like a club you didn't know you belonged to. Which demonstrates, I think, the power of bad TV to show us what we all have in common.
>
> Thanks for a fun thing—both the panel and the site!

Community members coming out to support recappers was not surprising. They had a high profile at the site and visited a lot of message boards to discuss shows as well as to moderate discussion. Many members felt as if they knew them and their creative works. What was remarkable was the ways in which the community supported other members and their events. One member was performing her stand-up material in New York and invited regional members to be part of the audience.

> If anyone is interested in a mini-*TWoP*con in NYC, I'll be performing stand-up Tuesday, June 15 & would love to have some *TWoP*ers there for support. Please email me and I'll give you the details.

At least ten members attended, from the discussion that followed:

> Just wanted to pop in and say how good a time I had at our NYC mini-con tonight, watching member243 do standup … as far as I could tell, a good time was had by all.
>
> Hey! So a big thanks to everyone who came and helped make everything go smoothly … it was a lot of fun! It was great seeing old faces again and meeting new ones.

The general *TWoP* Cons tended to be about meeting and talking with other members, while the show-specific conventions were also about

watching television. One of the most popular boards at *Television Without Pity* was *The Amazing Race* or TAR board. *The Amazing Race*, a competitive reality program in which pairs of contestants race around the world on a sort of scavenger hunt, was popular at *Television Without Pity*. Teams had their supporters and detractors on the *TWoP* boards, but the excitement of the final stages of each race prompted them to come together in real-life gatherings. Several long-time board members took upon the task of organizing these conventions regionally and almost all of those who posted after these events had glowing reviews.[14] They even attracted the attention of *Amazing Race* cast members. Eventually these particular conventions became quite large.

> Getting together to watch the TAR [The Amazing Race] premier sounds like a great idea!
>
> I've been a lurker here for years. And I've never been able to screw up the courage to attend a TARcon. But I'm so excited about TAR being on again; I want people to share this with!
>
> Well, boys and girls, looks like we may have some racers in attendance. Reichen and Toni also seem interested in going, but they decided to discuss off air. So no guarantees, but who knows who else may show up!
>
> More thank-yous for ____ and ____ and all who organized TARCon West—my friends and I had a great time and really appreciate all the effort that went into it, including the great souvenirs. Thanks SO much!
>
> A huge, huge thanks to John and Dez and all the others whose hard work made TarCon LA so thoroughly enjoyable. Great location (comfortable, roomy, not too loud, and a bigass TV screen) and great conversation. Was great talking about the best show on TV with ____, ____, and all the other happy fans. Hope to see you all for TAR6's finale!
>
> It was great to meet everyone! I was really apprehensive about going solo but I'm so glad I went because it was so much fun to watch it other rabid TAR fans! ____, if you're reading this, I'm glad you and your kids made the trek down from Palmdale. I enjoyed meeting you and listening to your stories!
>
> Great episode; I'm glad you could pull that together. The Amazing Race, The Amazing Editors, and The Amazing You! Thanks for putting together a great event. I want more now:)
>
> Thanks for the M&Mazing candy bars! (I didn't get that until just now. amazing)
>
> Glad to meet some Racers, thanks to Lori/Bolo/Joe for showing up.
>
> Also glad to meet some fanatical Race watchers, 'twas fun.
>
> Besides TAR1's Kevin, TAR3's Ken was there as well. Didn't see any other reality folks, but I wasn't really looking.

> What a strange and totally cool experience THAT was. I've never watched a tv show with a room full of rabid fans, and it was a rush, let me tell you. I laughed my ass off whenever there was a hearty chorus of cheers or a rumbling of boos. Pretty sweet.
>
> It was nice to see old TWoPCon faces, excellent to meet some lovely new people, and a tragedy to not get to know or talk to the rest of you who weren't sitting at my table.

Linda Holmes, who recapped for *The Amazing Race* at *Television Without Pity* recalled in an NPR article that the first *TWoP*Con for the show was in New York and she flew from Minneapolis to join the group. The cast members of that season's show also showed up, and almost all of them were members of the site and discussed the show in the boards.[15]

Holmes noted that members were often very generous and supportive of recappers and moderators, and recalls being sent many gifts. In her experience, "people are so much more randomly great than they are hostile; it's an important thing to remember."[16] In one of my interviews, former recapper Keckler noted that she is still in contact with some members even today.

> Two members who met on the boards are now married, and I was invited to their wedding. I couldn't go because of having a baby, but it was so lovely of them to include me. And when I had my first baby, one of the amazing knitters on the board sent me a beautiful sweater and cap for him, just as she had done for other babies born to members on the board. The sweater had a picture of the Enterprise on it. It was amazing and I will never ever give that sweater or cap away.[17]

This kind of community evolved out of the message board, and is perhaps not as easily reproducible in places like Twitter or in blog comment sections. Founder David T. Cole pushed for message boards (and still does) because that sense of community, of real conversation between people is important. He argues,

> Today you've got these places where comments perish very quickly. Even comments on an article are different from a bulletin board. They have a shorter shelf life. You tie your comments to an article and it has a 48-hour shelf life and that's it, it fades away.[18]

Conclusion

Television Without Pity was a community of amateur critics, a place where members gave each other the tools for cultural and aesthetic criticism, but it was also a community of people. Through building a collective intelligence base in order to further the goal of analyzing television, many came to know and help each other. Yes, these communities can impact their television shows and possibly lead to the creation more complex depictions of American life on screen, but these spaces are where we can see personal connections, real-life gatherings, and a sense of community that transcended the glow of the television screen.

Notes

1. Omar G, "The Al Gough Interview," *Television Without Pity*, last modified 5 May 2002, accessed 8 May 2002, http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/smallville/the_al_gough_interview.php
2. Omar G, "The Al Gough Interview," *Television Without Pity*, last modified 5 May 2002, accessed 8 May 2002, http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com/show/smallville/the_al_gough_interview.php
3. Richard Butsch, "Ralph, Fred, Archie, and Homer: Why Television Keeps Recreating the Working Class Male Buffoon," in Gail Dines and Jean Humez, eds., *Gender, Race, Class in Media* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012): 106–107.
4. "Shout-outs" are references or in-jokes that are, for the most part, covert, so that only those knowledgeable would notice them, but are also a way to acknowledge particular groups of viewers.
5. See the work of Camile Bacon-Smith, Henry Jenkins, Constance Penley, Joanna Russ, Deborah Kaplan, and Kristina Busse for a thorough discussion of slash fiction and its history.
6. Abigail DeKosnik, "Should Fan Fiction Be Free?" *Cinema Journal* v. 48 no. 4 (Summer, 2009): 121.
7. Melanie McFarland, "Fall TV Preview: Veronica Mars Gears Up for College and a New Format," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, last modified 19 July 2006, accessed 31 July 2006, http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/tv/277977_tv19.html
8. Maria Aspan, "TV is Now Interactive, Minus Images, on the Web," *The New York Times*, last modified 20 July 2006, accessed 25 July 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/08/arts/television/08fans.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0

9. Marshall Sella, "The Remote Controllers," *New York Times Magazine*, 20 October 2002, 68–73.
10. Hart Hanson, quoted in the documentary *Showrunners: The Art of Running a TV Show,* directed by Des Doyle, (Los Angeles: Romark Entertainment, 2014).
11. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 27.
12. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 23.
13. Barbara E. Martinez, "On the Web, a Network of Television Viewers, *Washington Post*, (12 November, 2002) C01.
14. It bears mentioning that those who did not enjoy these events probably would not have ventured onto the boards to say so, but even my interviewees had glowing reviews of their convention experiences.
15. Linda Holmes, "10 Absolutely True Stories about Television Without Pity," Monkey See Blog, NPR, last modified 31 March 2014, accessed 15 May 2014, http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2014/03/31/297338377/10-absolutely-true-stories-about-writing-for-television-without-pity
16. Linda Holmes, "10 Absolutely True Stories about Television Without Pity," Monkey See Blog, NPR, last modified 31 March 2014, accessed 15 May 2014, http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2014/03/31/297338377/10-absolutely-true-stories-about-writing-for-television-without-pity
17. Stephanie Lucianovic, personal interview with author, 25 July 2015.
18. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 4 September, 2015.

CHAPTER 4

"Sorkin Situations": The Television Auteur Meets the Digital Age

I found in my study a great deal of camaraderie between the creators of programs and the audiences posting at *Television Without Pity*. However, not all producer–audience relationships on the site fostered a sense of collaboration. The hope voiced by many members and creators during my study was that social media would open lines of communication, leading to the creation of relevant and more representative television stories. Even as television creators worked to expand the notion of the author as sole creator/owner by reintroducing more collaborative modes of storytelling, they are ultimately part of an institution that places strict legal and economic regulations on where author stops and audience begins. In examining the discourse, *Television Without Pity*'s message boards highlight sometimes very different concepts of authorship.

Television Without Pity's message boards are, unsurprisingly in a community of over a million daily viewers (a quarter million members), divided on the issues of authorship, power, and the extent to which viewers are entitled to an entertainment that meets their needs. Many members understand the legal aspects of copyright and authorship and explain what they know to the community when issues arise. Some members of the *Buffy* boards saw Twentieth Century Fox, the show's production company, as the villain and executive producer Joss Whedon as the hero when fan websites were shut down. Members explained that while Whedon supports fan fiction and fan videos, Fox does not, and they own the copyright. In the *Smallville* boards, when speculating about future plot lines

S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50000-7_4

on *Smallville*, members on the message board were quick to assert that DC Comics owns the character of Superman, and thus would not allow certain permutations of his character, particularly a romantic relationship between Clark Kent and Lex Luthor. In some of the more "fannish" areas of message boards, like the fan fiction boards that were popular, members who read fan fiction and created fan videos were careful about how they approached discussing slash fiction. Many were wary of repression from the network, authors, or actors who might take offense to their rewriting of the story, using copyright laws to shut down their websites. Many community members understood and were educated about copyright law, but many were frustrated by it as well. It was generally seen as an unmovable object, an unchangeable aspect of media storytelling.

The nuances of authorial control and meaning making, however, were up for rather lengthy debate. What I have come to call the "Sorkin Debacle" illustrates the struggle over artistic meaning and authorship in the digital age. In this chapter I explore how notions of authorship and legal ownership of artistic works has changed over time. This history lays the foundation for understanding how and why television auteurs such as Sorkin attempt to assert authorial control and limit the *Television Without Pity* community's cultural power as meaning makers.

Who's in Charge Here?

What makes someone an author? What assumptions are made when we use the term "author" in the context of storytelling? What power does an author have over her or his work? Discussions about notions of authorship were interesting moments in the *Television Without Pity* message boards. As with any large community of thinkers and writers, there were divergent ideas about what cultural and economic power any author deserves. In a message board about *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, one poster wrote about showrunner Joss Whedon: "We could complain all day, but ultimately it is *his* show, he calls the shots."

In a message board about an episode of *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, another poster posed a counter argument: "On some level, aren't they working for us? I mean beyond sponsors and networks and all that other crap, don't the writers at least feel a responsibility to deliver viewers a believable story!?" The ideas about authorship that circulated on *Television Without Pity* were varied, but many posters were keenly aware that no matter how authors work with audiences, there is a distinction between the two that places authors in an elevated cultural position.

The Role of the Author in Western Art and Philosophy

The idea of authorship that prevails today is informed primarily by cultural attitudes about creating art and legal definitions of copyright that have institutionalized some of those attitudes. Though it could be said that both artists and audiences today have varying definitions of what constitutes authorship, copyright and intellectual property laws have a much more restricted definition. This restricted definition prevents change at a structural level within the television industry in at least two ways: (1) it reinforces an outdated idea of authorship and entertainment, which helps creators see themselves in a necessarily hierarchical relationship with viewers; and (2) it provides economic incentive to keep an outdated idea in place by conflating authorship with ownable and transferable financial control over a work.

An "author" is assumed to be the creator of an original work, often also called an "originator," and who, as creator, merits the intellectual credit and financial benefits of such work. There are allowances for collaboration under this system, which grants "co-authorship"—an important component in television storytelling, as most programs have creators, producers, and large writing teams. But under this idea of authorship, the various influences and relationships outside the writing room—no matter how pivotal to the creation of a script—are not given legal or financial validation. I am not arguing that they should; however, financial and legal validation in many ways encourages a cultural concept of authorship that privileges the "singular artistic genius" idea brought forth during the Romantic period in literary history. It is a concept of authorship that places author above audience, and creates the idea that audience interpretation is not as meaningful as authorial intention.

Harvard legal scholar Lawrence Lessig's work on American copyright law and culture argues that the Internet has played an important role in solidifying the control media corporations (and thus media authors) have over stories. In his seminal work, *Free Culture*, Lessig argues that for a long time, "the ordinary ways in which ordinary individuals shared and transformed their culture—telling stories, re-enacting scenes from plays or TV, participating in fan clubs, sharing music, making tapes—were left alone by the law."[1] We are now in an age where corporations legally protect themselves from "ordinary individuals" and forge an even deeper chasm than before between the people who create television stories and those who view them. As much as television was talked about as "ours" by members of *Television Without Pity*, it has become less and less "ours" over its almost 70 year history.

Today's accepted notion of authorship comes from the "singular artistic vision" tradition, but is not a universal one. It grew out of the philosophy of Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Goethe, who saw authorship as "originary" in that it is completely original, transformative, and singularly genius. It is not, in other words, a mere improvement on previous works, nor influenced by them. It emerges from the author new and completely individual. The idea of the "genius author" comes after a long period of collaborative works of art and literature. Before the notion of a singular author emerged in the eighteenth century, ideas surrounding creation in art were a bit more fluid.

Martha Woodmansee, an English scholar at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, and Peter Jaszi, law professor at American University's Washington College of Law, examined the development of contemporary notions of authorship and law in the introduction to their edited work, *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature*. Jaszi and Woodmansee noted, "words and texts circulated more freely" in eras preceding the late-eighteenth century. They cite the lax approach to attribution of authorship in published works, and even the different use of quotation marks. Today's use of quotation marks indicates use of another's words, demarcating them from the author and attributing credit. Margreta De Grazia, a contributor to *The Construction of Authorship*, writes that "rather than cordoning off a passage as property of another, quotation marks flagged the passage as property belonging to all—'common places' to be freely appropriated (and not necessarily verbatim and with correct authorial ascription)." De Grazia asserts that it is not until after the seventeenth century that quotation marks begin to be used to accurately reflect another's work and give the author her or his due.[2]

Written works of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were often collaborative as well. The tradition of "commonplace books" is an excellent example of the acceptance of the notion of collaboration and the acknowledgement of the sphere of influence that predecessors and contemporaries provided. They also served as tools of collaboration themselves. Commonplace books were a sort of notebook or scrapbook that a writer, student or even an avid reader would keep in order to record quotes and other bits of writing gleaned from others. Commonplacing was an accepted way to remember and record ideas and thoughts that would serve your own works and reached the peak of its popularity during the Renaissance. Erasmus considered them an important educational tool, and a way to create a more organized and disciplined forms of reading.[3] Yale University's

exhibition on commonplaces in 2001 showcased, among other examples, a selection of volumes created by freshmen during the first two centuries of the university's existence.[4] Many commonplace books of authors, philosophers, and other celebrated thinkers were eventually printed and sold to the public. Woodmansee notes that a "quintessentially Renaissance" form of reading and writing involved creating a commonplace book in which transcriptions, comments, and altering the writing of others was the norm. Noting the original author or acknowledging ownership was considered unimportant. Another example of the acceptance of collaborative and copied works is the eighteenth century American practice of preachers "borrowing" sermons from one another, often mailing each other transcriptions.[5]

From the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, the concept of the author was more collaborative and the value of a work depended less on the people who created it and more on its connection with similar texts and traditions. Woodmansee cites St. Bonaventura, writing in the thirteenth century, who argued that there were scribes, compilers, commentators, and authors. In his definition of an author he does not grant singular originality, but rather an author is one who "writes both his own work and others' but with his own work in principal place adding others' for purpose of confirmation."[6] In other words, an author was seen as someone in dialogue or argument with his or her fellow thinkers. Authors were in conversation with others, usually a specific group of "others" that included elite members of society, such as those who could afford education.

This view of authorship co-existed with the concept of "inspiration," in which the author produces something so completely new and different from tradition that it is seen as inspired by some kind of muse, or even attributed to God. Though these seem like opposing ideas, even within the concept of inspiration lies the notion that the author is merely a conduit for something larger and not singularly genius. The idea of "inspiration" becomes embraced by the Romantic poets in the eighteenth century, with one small change: the source of inspiration is credited to the *author* rather than some outside force, and the work produced is seen not as part of some larger dialogue, but as something new that has never before existed.

The Romantic poets began to articulate a theory of authorship that emphasized originality and individualism. True authorship resulted in something that was neither an imitation nor an adaptation; it was unique and should be the property of its creator to do with what he wished. Originality became one of the central virtues of Romantic poetry, William Wordsworth arguing:

> Artists in this country play a very important role in capturing the essence of culture and recording it for future generations. It is often through art that we are able to see truths, both beautiful and ugly. Therefore I believe it is paramount to the integrity of our culture that we preserve the integrity of our artworks as expressions of the creativity of the artist.[7]

This theory emerges alongside industrialism in Europe and the United States. Indeed, the publishing industry, the growth of the middle class, and the idea of a "mass" audience were all entangled in this new idea about the author's role. Authors no longer wrote solely for other writers and philosophers. Publishers rewarded (and demanded) writers who sold books. The publication of novels had been increasing steadily in the eighteenth century. In the late 1780s they had reached an unprecedented spike in popularity. Distribution networks, printing innovations, the availability of cheaper materials, and a stronger organizational approach to publishing all contributed to this spike. This organizational approach came in part from a sudden need to prioritize after an economic downturn. Literature scholar Clifford Siskin writes:

> By the 1720s, all of the technological elements necessary for an acceleration in that business appeared to be in place: Britain had opened its first type foundry in 1720, the output of British paper had increased four-fold during the previous decade, and the booksellers were ready with their presses and their shops. But for the next quarter century, precisely the opposite happened. Demand for paper dropped precipitously, leaving many papermakers bankrupt and turning many of the mills back to their original uses as fueling and corn mills. During roughly the same period, the number of London booksellers dropped by more than half … the number of titles printed also fell significantly.[8]

This caused these new companies to prioritize money-making publications, thereby creating a new emphasis on appealing to the "common reader." Their likes and dislikes now had direct effect on a writer's livelihood. Many writers disliked the new mandate, among them Wordsworth, who argued there were two kinds of writers: authors and "professional writers." Authors were of a "worthier and nobler class" and did not write for profit, but "with a hope of being permanently beneficial to mankind." [9] In keeping with the older concept of authorship, he saw his role as primarily to engage in a discourse with others of his stature and education.

Copyright and Authorship

Copyright law emerges alongside this notion of authorship. It has been argued that copyright law is part of this new worship of the genius of a singular author. However, evidence suggests that Romantic notions of authorship emerged alongside the economic growth of publishing, and publishers had been important in creating the institution of copyright law. Peter Jaszi argues that, "Even in its incomplete, pre-Romantic form, 'authorship' had positive connotations as a designation for literary activity of special merit, and the booksellers co-opted the term to create a stable legal foundation of a market in texts as commodities." He further notes that after copyright law, the term "authorship" "remained a malleable concept, generally deployed on behalf of publishers rather than writers."[10] So part of the "preservation of integrity" and emphasis on the singular genius of the author Wordsworth espouses could be connected to what he saw as exploitative use of writers for publishing profits. The publishing world's focus on creating audience pleasing works rather than supporting "worthy" writers was, for him, a loss of integrity.

The Romantic notion of authorship continued to influence art well into the twentieth century. The concept of the author as genius originator is central to "auteur theory" in film, which emphasizes the director as the creative visionary for a film. The concept of the film auteur, according to film scholar John Thornton Caldwell, comes out of postwar French cinema. To find out what a film "means," this theory espouses, we are to look to the ideas and creative vision of the director. Despite the collaborative nature of film production, he (sometimes she) is considered the author of the story.[11]

Romantic notions of authorship were tested and questioned in intellectual circles by the latter half of the twentieth century. Indeed, many long-held notions of truth, objectivity, and authority were questioned during that period. Established fields such as history, literary criticism, and anthropology were beginning to incorporate these challenges to objectivity and truth. Literary criticism began to examine not just literary texts themselves, but the people who read them. Roland Barthes had claimed the "death of the author" in an effort to move away from the author as a site of meaning and solely concentrate on critiquing the texts they create. Scholars such as Stanley Fish and Janice Radway moved further by positing the authority of readers, rather than the text as the site of meaning making. Michel Foucault's "What is an Author" asked the field to re-examine

the commitment to Romantic notions of authorship, and to question the function of authorship (especially in literature). He argued that notions of authorship vary across time and place and that our current idea about how authorship functions was soon likely to disappear.[12] Academics in the humanities may have elaborate works questioning the validity or usefulness of the Romantic notion of authorship, but approaches to copyright legislation did not substantially change to incorporate those ideas.

Copyright laws expanded during this period, and the copyright laws that were refined in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries incorporated legal definitions of copyright that relied upon (and reinforced) the notion of the Romantic author. Copyright legal scholar Peter Jaszi notes in the early 1990s that:

> Copyright law, with its emphasis on rewarding and safeguarding "originality," has lost sight of the cultural value of what might be called "serial collaborations" works resulting from successive collaborations of an idea or text by a series of creative workers, occurring perhaps over years or decades.

He further explains that copyright laws have manipulated the notion of the Romantic author in ways that serve corporate interests over individual writers,

> the law formerly envisioned the possibility of improving existing works by redaction or expansion, modern copyright is more myopic, focusing exclusively on the potential for harm to the interests of the original "author."[13]

That "author," in many cases, is now a corporation rather than an individual as a result of the incorporation of a "work for hire" doctrine, which grants copyright of a work to an employer if the work was created as a condition of employment. This is based on the idea that "if the essence of 'authorship' is inspiration, then it is the employer's contribution as the 'motivating factor' behind that work … that matters, rather than the mere drudgery of the 'employee.'"[14] What this timeline shows is very different approaches to storytelling and the audience's role in entertainment. The professionalization of entertainment happens alongside the emphasis on copyright and authorial control. It depends and thrives on a "one way transmission" idea of entertainment, in which authors provide entertainment and the audience's role is to receive (and pay for) it. Television authors then are working with perhaps a conflicting ideology of ownership over the media texts

they create. The history of Romantic notions of authorship and auteurism are certainly part of the framework they use in deciding to take cultural ownership over their work, but it constantly comes into conflict with not only the way they must create those works (collaborative environments) but also the copyright laws that grant their employer copyright.

The Television Auteur

Most academic work about television has problematized the idea of television authorship. The "author" of most programs is perhaps at times perceived to be the network or television establishment. A good reason for this is the collaborative nature of television storytelling, with stables of writers, producers, directors, and executive producers (not to mention network and sponsor politics) contributing to the final product. The idea of a television auteur, or even "author," glosses over a very important element of collaboration.

Television challenged auteurism in other ways. Even though directors have always been employed in prime-time production, producers have had much more influence over the look and life of a series. Horace Newcomb and Robert Alley argued that television was a "producer's medium" (not a director's) and they showed how the "writer-producer" function in television had far more influence than many journeyman directors who merely come and go over the life of a series. Others have updated this theory by showing the fundamental role that executive producers, now called "showrunners," play in television.[15]

A great deal of the work that attempted a serious examination of television began in the 1980s and 1990s, during which cultural studies and other disciplines were examining television texts and audiences, rather than specific "authors." Even though this was the era during which poststructuralists were questioning an author-centered approach to meaning, it is during this era we start to see an emphasis on particular creators or "show runners" as notable and distinctive artists, a kind of "television auteur." Show runners during this period began to gain name recognition in journalistic criticism, and networks often used the name in order to promote brand-new programming. For instance, Stephen Bochco's success with *Hill Street Blues*, lent credibility to the next two series he created: *LA Law* and *NYPD Blue* all ensemble casts revolving around the legal system in a major metropolitan city. *The Cosby Show*, though pro-

duced by Marcy Carsey and Tom Werner (who continued on to produce top rated family television such as *Roseanne*, *Grace Under Fire*, and *That '70s Show*), is most popularly seen as authored by Bill Cosby, who had a large amount of creative control. Showrunners then, gained the cultural designation of auteurs or at least "authors" of television programs rather than directors.

In many ways the critical praises of these television auteurs validated television as an art form and elevated the seriousness with which critics (both popular and academic) approached the medium. The term "quality" television becomes a mantra for some networks, especially cable networks such as HBO. Indeed, by the 1990s and 2000s, we have critical darlings such as *Twin Peaks*, *The X-Files*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, and *The Wire*, all programs that catapulted their executive producers into "auteur" territory. One television program, *The West Wing*, boasted the auteur Aaron Sorkin, who wrote and directed many of the series' episodes. Sorkin garnered Emmy and Writers Guild awards for his work on the show, and went on to produce *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. His approach to authorship and meaning in television and his adversarial relationship with the critical community becomes important in my analysis of *Television Without Pity*. His entry into the community coincided with my earliest academic study of the site, and he was difficult to ignore. I must admit I did not even watch *The West Wing* (save for a few episodes here and there), and yet I found myself in the message boards like so many others as a result of the media coverage of Sorkin's conversations with (or at) the community at *Television Without Pity*.

The Sorkin Debacle and Authorial Control

Aaron Sorkin has long had a love/hate relationship with critics. He cultivated a following among critics with his second television drama, *The West Wing* (1999–2006), and returned in 2006 with NBC's *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. Jonathan Gray's study of television criticism found that critics were overwhelmingly positive about Sorkin's program, using terms like "smart," "witty," and "intelligent." Out of 23 reviews of *Studio 60*, he found 21 had very positive reviews, with some even holding the show up as a mark of quality television, one reviewer calling it "a great case for taking TV seriously." Gray notes that "the critics universally praise *The West Wing*, and most elevate Sorkin to the status of a television legend."[16]

Sorkin's understanding of authorship, and specifically his authorship of *The West Wing*, relies heavily upon Romantic notions.

The West Wing was a program that changed the approach at *Television Without Pity*. According to *TWoP* founder David T. Cole, the site had previously focused on "schlocky stuff, teen dramas, stuff people would put in a 'guilty pleasures' bucket." When *The West Wing* was initially presented in promotional ads before the first season started, the site was excited about covering the program. The writers had assumed that a show about the White House starring Rob Lowe would easily qualify as "schlocky" and predicted it would be terrible, thus perfect fodder for their scathing recaps. Cole said, "We had no idea it would be this well-written show, so we thought, 'we'll add that.' And then we discovered we could talk about quality television too." The show, the recaps, and the *TWoP* message boards were all incredibly popular.

Showrunner Aaron Sorkin entered *The West Wing* message boards under the handle "benjamin," his middle name. It took some convincing to get the community to believe this was really Aaron Sorkin, executive producer, director, and head writer of the program they were discussing. When I interviewed Sarah Bunting, one of the site founders, she remarked that, "at first we thought it wasn't him, because, the messages were actually not spelled or written very well."[17] He eventually verified his identity with Bunting, but the community saw verification when he was able to post about the teaser for an upcoming episode with great accuracy. At first, discussion with benjamin was full of praises. So much so that one of my interviewees claimed that "when he was actively posting I felt a portion of the boards were very congratulatory and, somewhat unusual grovely." Things took a turn, however, once a portion of the community in *The West Wing* message boards started to debate the political issues within and surrounding the text. By the end of the third season (late 2001, early 2002) Sorkin found it difficult to deal with negative reviews that pointed at what some members felt were sexist and racist representations. After a particularly intriguing discussion of the episode "Night," benjamin weighed in:

> I and everyone else here are, honestly, thrilled that there are these fan sites where strangers get together and talk about the show and like the show/don't like the show (I'd prefer if you liked the show) but you ought to disabuse yourselves of the notion that what we do is debate a point and then

> declare a winner. We're just telling our little stories and doing our lame jokes. And hoping you'll keep tuning in.
>
> "I spent a few minutes reading recent posts," notes "benjamin." "'Sexism'? 'Why I hate this show'? What happened to the good old days of 'Aaron Sorkin arrested'?"
>
> Wednesday nights at nine there are like 168 things on television, you should watch something else 'cause I don't think this show's your cup of tea.

It seems clear that Sorkin viewed *Television Without Pity* as a traditional "fan" site, and one that had perhaps lost its way. What is interesting about these three posts is that he does not defend the work they are discussing at all. He becomes defensive, but does not address their specific concerns, instead making jokes and downplaying the importance of their discussion completely. Seeing himself as very much the author in the Romantic sense, his main concern was that someone would criticize his work at all. This is perhaps why the boards roared back in response. Rachel Larris, one of my interviewees, published a blog on the incident and answered a few questions I had about her interpretation of the events. She was an active writer before, during, and after Sorkin's posts at *Television Without Pity*. She retells the story this way:

> We were having a lively discussion and there was definitely a good portion of people who strongly disagreed with the way sexual harassment in the workplace and the nuances of solving the problems in the Middle East had been handled.
>
> Enter benjamin. His post, had it been posted by any other poster, would have probably gotten him banned. It suggested that one poster should probably walk away from his computer/TV set and get outside more. It told deborah there were hundreds of other things to do at 9:00 p.m. on a Wednesday night and perhaps she consider doing them. It took to task people who couldn't see why he was not sexist. (For the record: no one was calling Sorkin sexist, just that there were some problems with the way certain situations and certain female characters were written).
>
> I didn't mind him poking fun at the posters. The truth is, we all do step over the line into obsessive/crazy/anal about minutiae and it's mock worthy behavior when we do. But Deborah [the site's *West Wing* recapper] was always very respectful of Sorkin, and gave him a lot of leeway when he posted, letting him break rules that no one else could so that we could have the benefit of his posts. So it made me angry when he attacked her for, as far as I could see, was the fact that she wasn't gushing over the mediocrity that was season three.[18]

Larris saw the exchange as Sorkin's attempt to control the discussion of his program. She argued in our interview that, "Sorkin was trying to deal with television using the old rules." Larris explained that in the past (before the Internet allowed for spaces such as *Television Without Pity*), television creators would not have had such direct access to audiences. If they decided to communicate with their audience at all, they had press releases and interviews with journalists that facilitated a connection. Today they have a third option: interaction, or as she puts it "div[ing] into the scrum" and taking the "two-way communication." Sorkin was unprepared to deal with the realities of audience response. She says "he wanted it to be two-way but only if it was mostly praise being returned."

Television critics, though perhaps not as prized culturally as theater, literature, or even film critics, do play an important role as tastemakers. And television critics were fascinated by this exchange. One, Michael Cieply, then a writer for the now defunct *Talk* magazine and now editor for the culture section of the *New York Times* not only reviewed Sorkin's engagement with *TWoP*, but saw it as "unseemly." According to Cieply, "Sorkin was put in the unseemly position of adopting a pseudonym to defend himself in an online chat room frequented by fans of the show." When *Television Without Pity* gets mentioned in the media, members make sure to point it out (there is an entire thread where posters discuss media mentions of the site), and so *West Wing* recapper and message board moderator Deborah read the article and posted an extended response.

> Number one: nobody put Sorkin in any position whatsoever. As previously stated, he had already been posting for six months or so when this thing erupted. He certainly is free to post or not post remarks as he wishes. Number two: I'm not sure exactly what's so "unseemly" about the fact that about fifty million people probably use "pseudonyms" online (or as we hipster young'uns call them, "user IDs" or "handles"). Sorkin probably would have registered as "Aaron" if that name hadn't already been taken by one of our esteemed recappers, and it's only a minority of people who use their real full names in posting on bulletin boards and Usenet anyway. Using a "pseudonym" does not in any way single him out as doing something "unseemly." ["PSA: for a whole raft of reasons, everyone *should* use pseudonyms online. Kids, play safe!"—*Wing Chun*] Number three: there's a big difference between an "online chat room" and a "discussion forum," which is what *MBTV* offers. Five minutes of research online would have provided Cieply with much of this information. What Sorkin was doing was making use of a public forum he was already completely accustomed to using.[19]

Sorkin's venture into the message boards was becoming a hot-button issue on *Television Without Pity*. Journalists were discussing his outburst in non-online venues, and though not everyone was negative about the show on the message board, those that were described feeling that his approach to audiences was problematic. It was a shock to the site founders, who regularly policed the boards. In my interview with Sarah Bunting, she argued that Sorkin had,

> implied that he had people to insulate him from this kind of thing. That if there was a negative review, that he would never see it. Or, that he would never stoop to responding to it. I get the feeling that a lot of people, if they see something that really pisses them off on the site about their work, that they are instructed by the publicity department or whatever, just to leave it alone. Sorkin slipped the leash for a couple days there.[20]

In a true demonstration of the balance of power at play in the producer–audience relationship, Sorkin got what one poster called "the last word" with an episode of *The West Wing* entitled "US Poet Laureate." In that episode, a subplot involved one character frequenting his own fan site, where a message board full of "fans" discusses and criticizes him. The character, Josh, argues that "it's a … crazy place. It's got this dictatorial leader, who I'm sure wears a muumuu and chain smokes Parliaments." C.J., another character, gives him the following advice: "Let me explain something to you, this is sort of my field. The people on these sites? They're the cast of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*."

This was immediately interpreted by many as a thinly veiled reference to Sorkin's time at *Television Without Pity* and not just "the Internet" more broadly. In my interview with David T. Cole, he claimed that there were elements of that particular scene that were direct references to conversations between Sorkin and the recapper on the site. Some thought it was an issue of Sorkin's feelings being hurt, such as the poster who argued, "Sorkin was personalizing Deborah's recaps and board postings, etc., and got caught up in defending himself." She further argued that "US Poet Laureate" was an attempt to assert a kind of power for Sorkin, saying "I think it is possible to watch the episode without allowing him that kind of power, just like he could have read her recaps and posters' comments without allowing them power over him. He just didn't do it, and this was the result." Others saw it as validation, a kind of "shout out" to the community, even though it was not the nicest one, such as the member

who posted, "It's sort of like an 'in-joke' only it's an 'in-insult' instead." But the prevailing theory was that Sorkin's hubris did not allow for a lowly website message board to properly analyze his work; that they, the obsessed fans, didn't understand that these were mere "little stories" as he claimed. One member summed it up quite well when she argued that:

> Consider that Sorkin is talking politics on his show and using real world examples. His characters aren't having discussions about nothing. Fiction matters. Rightly or wrongly people learn from fictional TV shows … This is why some of us posters felt strongly about how he treated real world subjects, such as Muslims and the Middle East. It's the very reason cultural critics talk about TV shows and movies that deal with real problems. Because people learn about the world from what is reflected in TV, even more so about obscure or slightly known political events.

The site's recappers (who were also posting in the boards) responded to the episode similarly. Shack discussed the episode in his recap and argued that

> All the dead artists in the world are collectively spinning in their graves at the suggestion that, like Sorkin, they were all just telling their "little stories." Those little stories, and paintings, and plays, and symphonies, and poems, and yes, television shows have shaped every single culture on this planet, and in some cases, are all we have left of them. If Sorkin is afraid to be a part of that because he's afraid of getting it wrong, or afraid that people won't understand, or if he's just afraid to—oh, I don't know—*grow a pair* and take his critical lumps just like every other artist and learn from it, then fine. We lose a talented mind with an interesting view of the truth, and he loses the right to call himself an artist. But I will not just sit here and say nothing as he tries to drag the rest of the art world down with him.

Though the public response was rather serious, recappers at the site also enjoyed the moment. Recalling the incident in a blog post for NPR's *Monkey See*, former recapper Linda Holmes related that the episode thrilled most of the recappers, saying "we found this intoxicatingly delightful, it was the moment I personally felt that the site had arrived, and muu muu/Parliaments jokes became recapper-to-recapper standards."[21]

The message board that catalogued the conversation after "US Poet Laureate" is no longer available due to a system crash that purged a lot of the site's data, but members still discussed it long after the event. As late

as 2006 the incident was still a topic at *The West Wing* message boards, with one poster surmising that, "There absolutely is no last word on the Internet, but at least in this case, his word was clearly the loudest. An hour of prime-time network television is just so much a bigger megaphone than anything on the Internet." Another wrote, "I do feel, though, that by writing us into the show, into his 'art,' that Sorkin immortalized us a little bit—and that there is some power in that. By acknowledging us, he gives us power. Even in the face of the 'last word' argument and all."

Rachel Larris found the episode distasteful and evidence of what she already believed about the incident: that this was about Sorkin's loss of control over interpretation.

> Sorkin was at times less attacking critics than he was attacking a portion of his own audience and trying to force his version of an interpretation of his work to be the definitive one. By writing a TV script that rewrites arguments in which Sorkin "wins" against perceived critics and slights, his attempt is to make sure there is only one interpretation for the audience about these arguments.[22]

It is also possible that Sorkin enjoys a variety of interpretations, but only from people he considers qualified to criticize his work. The animus between Sorkin, the *Television Without Pity* community, and Internet fans in general, continued after he embarked upon another program, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*.

Another hour-long drama, this show was not overtly about politics, it was instead about creating a television program. This offered Sorkin many opportunities to espouse his ideas about both creators and audiences. It also illustrated his reliance upon notions of Romantic authorship. His new program was met with poor reviews from critics at major newspapers. An article in the *Chicago Tribune* from 2007 describes an evening with Sorkin in which several dozen members of the press were given an "hour long aria" about the bad press surrounding the show. He felt the press was not really writing about the show itself, but about the poor expectations of online detractors.

Among his major problems with the coverage of *Studio 60* was what he saw as a problem with journalism. He argued,

> I do believe that we've seen an enormous rise in amateurism. One of the things I find troubling about the Internet, as great a resource tool as it is, and as nice as it is that we can all communicate with each other, and that

> everybody has a voice—the thing is, everybody's voice oughtn't be equal. When the New York Times quotes a blogger, saying "PastyBoy2000 says this," suddenly you give it the imprimatur of the New York Times.[23]

He makes sure to portray his online detractors as obsessed fans running a smear campaign, arguing, "for a group of people who don't like the show, they certainly watch it obsessively and can quote every line from every episode." Sorkin sees professional critics as valuable voices, but online critics are his audience, the bulk of whom he sees as passive and unable to interpret the high art he created for television. He argued that though the ratings for *Studio 60* were down, the audience it did have was *worth* more, arguing "it's the most upscale audience on TV. We have the highest concentration … of households earning more than $100,000 a year," and that it is a "high-end" audience that is not accounted for because they all own TiVos, which Nielsen did not then use in their ratings calculations. He argues that there are ways he could change the show to appeal to a broader (and he implies, more unintelligent) audience, but that would be a "mistake to do things creatively in order to attract that audience." Moreover, the kind of audience who enjoys *Studio 60* is one that is actively interpreting:

> I'm like most people, I think, when it comes to TV, when I come home at night I want to have fun with characters that I like, I want it to be comfortable. One difference between this show and other shows on TV is that this show is not good background TV. You can't really watch it passively … TV has a passive relationship with its audience, we're [often doing other things while we watch it]. You need to watch it as if you're watching a play or a movie.[24]

Maureen Ryan, the author of the aforementioned *Chicago Tribune* article, notices the seemingly conflicting ideas present in these statements, writing, "I just don't know what the man wants." He at once wants an active, educated audience, but does not grant their criticism a place in the discussion of his work. He seems to desire a passive audience, though he claims the opposite. And he makes sure to associate himself and his work with markers of high culture, cultivating an idea of himself as an auteur.

The "Sorkin Debacle," though extremely high profile, was not the only instance of an author having problems with the criticism at *Television Without Pity*. In June of 2006, the popular FX drama *Rescue Me* aired

an episode containing a graphic scene of violent sex between the central character and his ex-wife. At *TWoP*, there was concern that the scene seemed to not just depict rape, but encourage it. Peter Tolan, executive producer and co-author of the episode, decided to enter the discussion as a result. At the end of a long post, wherein he tried to apologize and defend his choices with the scene, he wrote, "Welcome to writing a television drama. We're trying to do something different. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we don't." Tolan later confessed to John Solberg, a spokesman for FX, that the decision to enter the fray was not good one and that it ended up creating more controversy. Site founder Tara Ariano was surprised that Tolan did not anticipate any negativity after his post, stating, "when you write a script like that, you've got to expect some controversy."[25] In an interview with a blogger from *IGN*, Tolan's response is less tempered by an FX spokesman's spin: "Going on that f***ing website was the stupidest thing I ever did," Tolan said. "Everything I posted was dissected and analyzed and then misquoted. And then the next post was about that post and then there was a post about the post about the post."

Dennis Leary, star of *Rescue Me* and also an interview subject for the *IGN* article argued that going on the site was a mistake because "the Internet sucks." For him, the controversy was not important because the acting was good: "In that scene she was fantastic," he said, adding, "Her emotional range was incredible."[26] Would creators like Sorkin and Tolan have got into arguments with newspaper critics via letter or email in the way they did with their online critics? Perhaps, but the public way in which these discussions unfolded paints a picture of artists who are uncomfortable with being taken to task by people who they deem unqualified. These critics may be nit pickers, some of whom are "obsessed" with television programs, but they are also different from the bulk of newspaper critics in important and valuable ways. A look at the membership roll of the Television Critics Association shows that less than half are women, and an even smaller percentage write for major metropolitan papers like the *New York Times*. *Television Without Pity*'s community is skewed heavily toward female membership. These critics are also not beholden to conglomerates that often own the very texts they are reviewing. The idea that "audiences" who go online could be called "critics" seems anathema to auteurs like Sorkin and Tolan, who are invested in an artform that needs critics to create a buffer between their work and the public they seek to entertain.

The Internet and the Democratization of Criticism

The "democratization of criticism" that *TWoP* and sites like it engendered has challenged the idea of authorial control in what could be considered a more intellectual and immediate way than those rabble-rousing eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American theater audiences. Historian Raymond Haberski's book, *It's Only a Movie*, looks at the cultural authority of the film critic and evaluates its decline in the age of Internet criticism. His argument draws some interesting parallels to television Internet criticism. He argues that famed film critics like Susan Sontag, Roger Ebert, and David Denby all agreed that not only are movies not what they used to be, but critics no longer have the power to move filmgoers. In the 1960s and 1970s, Haberski argues, film critics were finally treated like intellectuals because movies became powerful, they "mattered to the public."[27] The new movie culture was a result of the impact of foreign film and avant-garde film on American filmmakers, but the dismantling of the restrictive Production Code and establishment of a ratings system also contributed to a rejuvenation of the medium. The decline of film is attributed by many of the aforementioned critics to the emphasis on high profits at major film studios. This focus on the bottom-line at the expense of art has led the intellectually minded away from major motion pictures and cinephilia in general. According to Haberski, "we should be concerned about the demise of cinephilia because, as many contemporary movie critics suggest, our culture seems more cynical because of it."[28] Furthermore, film (and film culture) is not helped by the Internet's democratization of criticism. He laments what he calls the "fact of contemporary movie culture" that critics have no more cultural authority than the audience and argues that the influx of everyday people into the realm of film criticism has "undermined the national conversation over the meaning of culture in a democracy."[29]

Central to this theory is the idea that democratization makes each opinion equally valid, thus rendering the impact of all opinions meaningless. He seems to be arguing much along the same lines as Sorkin, who famously argued, "everyone's voice oughtn't be equal." What is evident here is that Haberski seems to have looked at the playing field in terms of competing critics, the self-appointed critic on the Internet, and the culturally enshrined critic of journalism who is expected to have some kind of film education. This is what you would see if you looked up a movie criticism website like *Rotten Tomatoes*; A list of critics with journalistic

pedigrees right next to bloggers who have (seemingly) no credentials. What Haberski fails to see is how communities of critics are divided and exist within a hierarchy themselves. Most sites like *Rotten Tomatoes* have a "top critics" kind of section where anyone can look for the highly regarded critics amongst the fray. He also fails to acknowledge that contemporary critics are simply assumed to have "credentials" simply by virtue of being hired by major newspapers. Many critics, like the late Roger Ebert, started out as journalists not film students. I agree that it is difficult to find consensus in a sea of critics, but does consensus matter in the way he thinks it does? When he pronounces the death of the "national conversation" about film, he seems to be lamenting the loss of stature that a uniform group of people with relatively uniform views had on the meaning and purpose of entertainment. Has this created a cynical audience? If so, does that necessarily mean an apathetic audience?

The history of television criticism is quite different from film, and a cursory glance at academic work on television criticism shows that the term "television criticism" has long been up for debate. Television has rarely been given status as high art as a result of its commercial structure and the emphasis on pleasing a broad audience. Early in television's history, writing by critics such as Jack Gould, John Crosby, and Michael Arlen were relied upon by network executives to gauge the quality of programming, but soon the industry dominated critics. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, networks created press junkets for previews of programming and sometimes deprived journalists of access to them when they gave unfavorable reviews. The perks provided to journalists who toed the line were often in the form of expenses paid trips to Los Angeles and access to celebrities. In 1977 the Television Critics Association was founded partly to legitimate television journalism. The TCA created "press tours" twice a year, which were independent of network-funded junkets and did not bar reporters from asking hard questions. Today, television journalists are perhaps more able to review programs without bias than film critics are able to review films. According to work done by television scholar Amanda Lotz, whose history of television criticism greatly informs this discussion, unlike today's film junkets, today's television press tours do not require journalists to sign waivers regarding taboo subjects. Television press tours also provide access to studio executives, whereas film executives are rarely part of movie junkets.[30] So the maligned history of television criticism as unintellectual is at odds with the almost 40 years of relative independence of television reviewers at

major publications. However, this independence does not mean that television critics are free from commercial limitations.

The proliferation of television channels since the 1980s has resulted in an upsurge in the sheer quantity of programming available both in the traditional format as well as online. This has shifted critics' focus. Now it is important to focus on programs that have viability in their publication's market. Reviewing a web series is perhaps less relevant to a publication whose readership skews older, for instance. Critics also seem to have much more to review than they could conceivably be able to, and thus, according to Lotz's study, they tend not to produce many unfavorable reviews. Programming that is not highly regarded tends to be ignored in favor of that which is likely to have continued longevity. The web has expanded the readership of television critics, and has created a space for the kind of intellectual criticism that is characteristic of high art. Web journalists and bloggers have found niche markets to discuss programs that large print publications might not ever acknowledge. Moreover, the interactive nature of the web has led to a broader range of criticism as readers engage in the conversation below the article.[31]

Conclusion

From my analysis of the online world at *Television Without Pity*, a "democratization of criticism" if such a thing could be said to be had, has either reinvigorated or made visible the audience's emotional involvement, and allowed many people to see that audiences of all kinds (not just fan subcultures) interact with popular culture in different ways than just escape. It has created an important alternative to Nielsen ratings and the system that prioritizes monetary gain from sponsors over impactful storytelling. What has it lost as a result of this democratization of criticism? For Haberski, we've lost a "national idea" or "consensus" about morality, entertainment, media. These, I believe, were arguably myths to begin with. What it has done that makes creators and corporate media companies uncomfortable is that it has made it much more difficult to categorize and thus sell a large "general" audience. It also conflicts constantly with legal and cultural definitions of authorship. Internet critics have brought to light that control over a text and its meaning is constantly challenged. In this way many authors take a combative or defensive stance towards these online communities. There is friction between authors, who are emboldened in their claims over their work by the legal and cultural ownership, and

audiences, who see the plurality of interpretation as normal and useful way to experience storytelling entertainment. Internet criticism of television programs has brought authors into a sometimes very direct conversation with their audience, in ways that parallel pre-Romantic notions of writing/art as part of a conversation. However, much like Wordsworth, Sorkin (and others) have decided that the conversation should be limited to a specific kind of audience for it to matter. *Television Without Pity* is just one place where we can see how the unprecedented access to television authors via social media has challenged a long-established cultural hierarchy that positions authors above audiences, with critics acting as cultural gate keeping intermediaries. Will authors like Sorkin hold on to the ideal of individual originary genius as communities like this one become more commonplace? It is hard to tell. What we do know for certain is that the once fringe Internet world of media critics is now becoming part of how people understand their entertainment choices. When this study began in 2000, many networks were just starting to revamp their websites, and several did not host any form of online discussion: from *Amazon.com* reviews to the side-by-side positioning of amateur bloggers' movie reviews with the likes of Richard Roeper on sites like *Rotten Tomatoes.com*. The adage that "everyone's a critic" might be becoming more apt than ever before.

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CHAPTER 5

"Shows You Hate (But Watch Anyway)": The Dark Side of Online Criticism

The media coverage of the hostility between Sorkin and the community at *Television Without Pity* marked the site as a place full of hostile critics. This was not totally without merit. Indeed, negative criticism, albeit embedded with humor, was built into the mantra of the site. Certainly, the image created on *The West Wing* of a mental patient wearing a muu muu and chain-smoking parliaments contributed to the idea that this was a site full of "trolls," denizens of the Internet who seek to only contribute negativity and impede decent conversation. Though creators like Aaron Sorkin and Peter Tolan may have seen the site as a hotbed of trolls, there was a marked difference between trolls and the more critical members of *Television Without Pity*. Every social media site has its share of trolls, but labeling the negative criticism there as simply "trolling" dismisses real critique, and reinforces the notion that everyday people are not equipped for critical discussion about the media they consume. What is perhaps a term that is closer to the tenor of the negative criticism on the site is Jonathan Gray's, "anti-fan behavior." An examination of discussions surrounding several programs, including MTV's *The Real World* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, illustrates how *TWoP* members found spaces to develop both empathy and antipathy, all the while producing necessary critiques of bad television.

S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience*,
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The New Media Landscape

As evidenced by the previous chapter, the message boards at *Television Without Pity* provided, in some instances, a direct line to the creators of television programs. They became popular with many creators at major networks early on, according to Sarah Bunting, *TWoP* co-founder and administrator. In an interview conducted in the fall of 2002 with Bunting, she indicated that she had been informed that networks and production companies had hired staff to read Internet message boards, and that many production assistants, writers, directors, and even actors had posted on the *Television Without Pity* message boards. She also indicated that there were rumors that some networks considered the *Television Without Pity* community as representative of a certain demographic when scheduling shows each season. She believed this was part of a general trend in the industry of taking the Internet seriously. She noted, "As the medium matures, they take it more seriously as a critical medium, on par with print."[1] The site's popularity rose at precisely the beginning of that transition from print to digital media.

This new connection between creator and viewer was more immediate than conventional print reviews or even focus groups. "Television writers really work in isolation [from audiences]," argues *Battlestar Galactica* executive producer Ronald D. Moore, but "the Internet really changed the immediacy of the contact." Moore realized that building a community around the program could bridge that connection between the world of the viewer and that of the writer. *Battlestar Galactica*'s producers released podcasts after each episode, created video blogs, and encouraged online communities to discuss the show by entering the dialogue themselves.[2] The show-sponsored sites are indicative that networks and creators were becoming interested in online discussion, but also that they were interested in managing it just as much as they were interested in viewing the discourse. Most of the FAQs and terms of membership on show-specific sites were full of legal jargon denying message board posters of copyright over their posts. *Television Without Pity* stood out as a large, popular, and independent site of critical discourse until 2007, when it was bought by a major network. As early as 2002, Sarah Bunting confirmed that the copyrights for each posts belonged to the author, not the site. This independence from specific programs and media companies allowed for a different kind of "fan" to emerge. One that could hardly be deemed a "fan" at all.

A certain kind of chummy environment was a major part of the *TWoP* experience, but as in any community this vast, there was also a darker component. It is not hard to imagine that a community of critics would have within it people who found great joy in deconstruction, and whose contributions consisted solely of negative appraisals. The site's motto "spare the snark, spoil the networks" encouraged harsh criticism. One of my favorite topics in the "TV Potluck" section of *Television Without Pity* was a board entitled "Shows You Hate (But Watch Anyway)." In an effort to imagine the site as a kind of watchdog on the television industry, the site's administrators and recappers were often leaders by example. One of the earliest interviews with a television writer/producer (Ed Bernero, *Third Watch*) started with "Why does your show suck?"[3] This created an environment for a new kind of fan, according to media studies scholar Jonathan Gray. The "anti-fan" takes pleasure only in criticizing the text, and no pleasure in the text itself. He writes,

> Often with increasing organization, and contributing to campaigns or groundswells that sometimes dwarf or rival their fan counterparts, anti-fans—those who dislike a given text, personality, or genre—are as much a presence in contemporary society as are fans, and yet, academic accounts of them are fleeting and few.[4]

Fandom is often associated with obsession, devotion, and the pleasure derived from media texts. There is little academic work done on "anti-fandom," where hatred of the text is central to experience. The pleasure, for anti-fans, is derived from critique, parody, and ridicule. Decades of research into media fandom has yielded a great deal about the pleasures within critique, and the often oppositional stance fans take with regard to the direction of a narrative or character. The works of Henry Jenkins, John Fiske, Camille Bacon-Smith, and others led fandom into the light and illustrated the complexity of audience engagement. These early accounts of fans are often remembered as celebratory, touting fans as rebellious, scandalous, and oppositional within culture despite being inextricably connected to a media product. Studies such as these focused on community building within fandom and its ability to enrich and empower the individual.

Fan culture has its share of discontents. Depending on the fandom, there can be incredibly hierarchical structures, exclusionary tactics, and disputes in fan groups. This can serve to deny the utopic vision of a communal, loving,

fan environment, and so initially, many scholars did not focus on that aspect of fan culture. Early work sought to challenge the stereotype of deviance that pervaded popular culture representations of fan life. Once fandom was validated as a subject of study, scholars sought to describe the complexities of social fandom. Work done by Nancy Baym, Matt Hills, and others has documented the lack of harmony and sometimes outright racism and sexism within fan groups. While fans do engage in vitriolic critiques of their texts, at the core of fandom is an initial love for the text, a desire to make it better *through* critique. Though the rituals and themes of critiques are similar, anti-fans do not need love to engage with their texts. Hated pop culture texts such as the *Twilight Saga* have legions of anti-fans; people whose sole connection to the series of books and films is their dislike of them.

Jonathan Gray's work on anti-fandom clearly demarcates anti-fans as people with absolutely no like for the text, despite sometimes knowing a lot about it. After conducting interviews with fans and anti-fans of *The Simpsons*, he found that the anti-fans were well versed in many aspects of the program. He argued, "The assumption behind not enquiring into anti-fans may be that, through their dispassion for the text, they know little about it, do not watch it and thus are poor informants."[5] *Television Without Pity* had many members who disliked certain programs, did not watch those programs, but used the recaps as a foundation for their critiques.

Perhaps one reason why anti-fandom is not well documented is that this aspect of the participatory audience is usually lumped in with trolling, the practice of posting offensive, rude, or negative remarks in social media settings. Generally, an important component of trolling is that the "troll" is posting the remarks for the explicit purpose of enraging the audience. Eliciting a response is central to the pleasure derived from trolling, thus the aforementioned words of Internet wisdom most message board and comment board users know: "do not feed the trolls."[6] Dismissing anti-fans, or *TWoP* members as trolls is a mistake. The members themselves often discussed how they (the Internet audience) were negatively perceived by creators:

> There is a whole world of difference between a careful critique of a writer's work and silly ranting about how you'd like said writer to be tortured … I get very irritated with the stuff Joss [Whedon] and Marti [Noxon] say in interviews because they are determinedly ignoring any criticism that is not written by insane people because acknowledging thoughtful criticism would be inconvenient.

Some tried hard to set themselves and the community apart from other websites or other kinds of audiences:

> I get that there are trolls out there who just want to bring everything down to "I hate Spike" but we're making real arguments about real problems with the plot and characters last season. Making us out to be crazies only makes Joss and Marti look insecure.

Being lumped in with trolls was a real concern for members of *Television Without Pity*, and ousting "real" trolls from the site was an important part of community membership. The "Troll Patrol" board was a place set aside specifically to report posts and posters that qualified as "trolling." If a moderator was not quick enough to catch it, a troll could derail conversation. As a result, the membership was actively self-policing, updating the Troll Patrol board with posts such as these:

> Member X is having a meltdown, trash talking, attacking, and getting personal here: [link].
>
> Member Y is engaging in vicious, all-caps name-calling in the Survivor Finale post-show thread.
>
> I know *Dark Ange*l fans are upset over its cancellations, but Member Z is posting trollish messages in the "Save *Dark Angel*" thread.

From top to bottom, ousting trolls was a priority at *Television Without Pity*. The FAQ for the message boards at *TWoP* explicitly asked the community to contribute to ousting troublemakers in their "Warnings, Bans, and Trolls Dos and Don'ts" section, which stated "Do help us out and report trolls, flame wars, and troublemakers by clicking on the Report link at the bottom of the post." In addition, in other incarnations, the FAQ explained that manners were important, and thus trolls were to be ousted. They further defined the term for the membership:

> In a nutshell, a troll is a shitdisturber. A troll may:
>
> Post offensive messages only to get you angry
>
> Post the same thing over and over again to take up space and ruin the flow of the forums
>
> Post only to intrude on your goodwill and advertise some crap-ass site or try to sell you bootleg copies of something.
>
> Start hurling insults left and right in hopes of starting a flame war.
>
> A troll is not:

> Someone who—in the course of a real debate or discussion—pisses you off with an opinion that is different from yours

The administration was quick to delete or edit messages deemed as trolling. When they did so, they often left obvious indications of the edit, such as this message from 2002:

> I saw several pages back that many people were wondering if Doug was married or not. That is the only reason I posted. And *I* do know it is a fact because I have spoken with several people from the show.
>
> [Edited to remove unnecessary insult.—Kim]

The emphasis on manners and creating a space for polite and engaged discussion was important to the founders and to many in the *TWoP* community. Most of my respondents remarked that the reason they kept returning to the message boards was that it was a superior level of conversation, free of the trolls and puerile comments that were allowed to run rampant on other sites. Yet most discussion of Internet critics, even today, focuses on the worst behaved members of the web. It was a difficult stereotype to overcome.

Alongside the rise of Internet message boards, online article comments, and user reviews of products and services, there was a cultural discussion of the tenor of these amateur critics. Film critic David Denby railed against the very kind of negative critique central to *TWoP*'s approach to television: "snark." In 2000, I learned the term via the site's mantra. By 2009, Denby saw this approach to criticism as a plague:

> A future America in which too many people sound mean and silly, like small yapping dogs tied to a post; in which we insult one another merrily in a kind of zany brouhaha; in which the lowest, most insinuating and insulting side threatens to win national political campaigns—this America will leave everyone, including the snarkers, in a foul mood once the laughs die out.[7]

Denby saw snark as toxic and lacking in imagination, which he claimed marked it as different from wit. He argued that insult has its place (directed at the powerful) within trusted highbrow forms such as the "satire, spoof, lampoon, burlesque," all, he argued, were "heaven-sent forms."[8] People on the Internet, however, are not engaging in such forms. The use of snark in contemporary times is all about disengaging from real ideas and enforcing "mediocrity and conformity." However, what I saw (even in the

darkest places) amongst posters at *Television Without Pity* was a commitment to bettering television. Repositioning "snark" as trolling behavior, Denby misses out on precisely the wit and analysis that underlie anti-fan critique.

Television Without Pity was a very hospitable environment for anti-fans and/or for participating in textual dislike. Online communities of fans tend to oust those who are only critical and offer no evidence of enjoying the text at all. Alex Wexelblatt found this to be true in his study of *Babylon 5* fans. He argued, "there is no reward structure in the fan community for oppositional critical analysis, whereas the rewards for friendly analysis are direct and obvious."[9] However, *Television Without Pity* in its name alone indicated that there were rewards for this type of negative connection to media texts. Gray points out that though *TWoP* could have been viewed as a kind of fan site, it was definitely not:

> Although significant areas of the site resemble a fan site, with space for character worship, spoilers, speculation, fanfic, and general debriefing of episodes and their issues, *TWoP* also provides ample room for networking textual disappointment, dislike, disapproval, distaste, and disgust.[10]

His study found that certain areas where dislike was prevalent focused heavily on elements that veered far from "bad writing/acting" or "unrealistic portrayals." These areas were about character judgments and were often angry. He wrote, "we see a mode of engagement with text and medium that focuses heavily on the moral and the emotional, seeking in some ways to police the public and textual spheres."[11] Though he only focused his study on three message boards, he did focus on the reality show *The Apprentice*, and the textual dislike he found there. His theory about these moral objections centered on the idea that moral objections were easier to defend than aesthetic evaluations:

> Some of these viewers may have aesthetic objections to these texts … that they hid behind the veneer of a moral objection, because moral objections can at least appear more principled, or even concrete, than can the rather subjective territory of aesthetic evaluation.[12]

It is important to note that by 2005 when Gray's study was published, the site had grown significantly and had become well known as a place where television took its lumps from viewers. For the most part, the members of *The Apprentice* board were not interested in talking about esoteric topics

in other boards such as Judith Butler's theories or narrative style. This was a reality show, and they talked about real people.

> During the course of several months, the forum for *The Apprentice* attracted hundreds of antifan postings discussing the perceived ills of one of the show's contestants, Omarosa Manigault-Stallworth. This culminated in more than 200 pages of texts and ultimately, a letter-writing campaign to stop Clairol from using Omarosa as a spokesperson for their Herbal Essences shampoo.[13]

Organized group action about anything other than keeping a show on the air is incredibly rare amongst members of this community (at least from the community—on their own many of my responders were active politically). "Bit by bit, then" Gray argues, "a large number of posters came together to decide that for a variety of reasons, they did not want this person in the public sphere, that she was poisonous to it …." He noted that posters called her a "nasty person" who was sabotaging someone else's life (the other contestant on the show). They discussed her lack of integrity, decency, and were appalled that she had been given an endorsement opportunity with Clairol. To these anti-fans, Omarosa did not deserve to be rewarded for her awful behavior. For most of television history, a "bad" character on a scripted program would most likely be appropriately punished. Were these anti-fans unhappy with the narrative because it differed from standard television fare, or was there more at stake? One poster mentioned what she felt was at stake with the statement, "if she continues to be rewarded for bad behavior, it sends a horrible message to the children we are raising to do the right thing." Gray noted that the letter writing campaign against Omarosa was immediately popular, with posters sharing their letters. He argued that "viewers forcefully tried to inject themselves into the huge television-advertising industrial complex to stop what they felt was its latest (even worse) egregious violation against morality."[14]

I have to say that during my tenure (over a decade) as a member and researcher, the most intensely passionate moments of dislike and antipathy I found were in reality show boards. Interestingly, the angriest and most shallow forms of criticism were reserved for real people (albeit real people mediated through a narrative framework for television). *Television Without Pity* did not exist apart from the world, however, so when some of these reality show cast members entered the boards, they found and responded to their critics. One instance in which cast members changed the tone and direction of discussion happened in the *Real World: New Orleans* board.

Real World Anti-fans Meet *The Real World* Cast

Kelley Limp and Melissa Howard, cast members on MTV's *The Real World* in New Orleans, were a topic of discussion on the boards before they appeared. The *Real World* message boards had many fans, people who had loved the show and were excited about each new season. It also had its share of "hatewatchers," or those who tuned in specifically to join in the criticism that followed. Among the comments by board members were remarks about Kelley and Melissa's physical appearance, denigrations of their character, and accusations that they were "stupid," "whores," or both. Members debated whether Melissa looked like a "troll" in a magazine photo shoot, and spent pages discussing how "awful" and "ridiculous" Kelley's eyebrows looked on screen. Imagine then, the reaction upon Kelley and Mellissa's entrance to the discussion. Kelley's first post indicated that reading posts about her "awful" eyebrows was not helpful or kind, mentioning, "I now have an eyebrow complex. I never realized how hideous people thought they were. Oh well." Kelley argued that viewers "only see a limited amount of who we really are," and that she ventured into the boards with the intent to defend herself against rumors and criticism. "Wow," she wrote, "I really shouldn't look at these things, but it has gotten to the point when I walk down the street, I wonder if the people I meet are the people who say these nasty things about me." Though she joined in October of 2000, she had relatively few posts compared to Melissa.

Melissa was the first to join in on a regular basis, arguing that any accusations of character were woefully uninformed. She explained to the group that the "character" the producers created was not her, and that through editing them into characters they produce a coherent narrative that created a soap opera out of relatively mundane moments between seven strangers. Melissa discussed there the ways MTV tried to alter her personality for their program, despite it being about people "getting real". She described on the *TWoP* boards that she had gone to photo shoots where clothing was chosen for her that she would never wear. These outfits were chosen to reflect the character that the producers had decided Melissa would become. "It was reinforced all the time," she wrote, "when we would do photo shoots or whatever. I remember the makeup artist saying, 'Well, it's come back to us that you can't do glamorous.' So, they'd put me in this kooky-ass outfit." As the season wore on, she argued that it became useless to complain, and that, "after a while, you just stop arguing and just go with it. You have no control."

She explained that her rebellious nature on the show was a response to the constant limitations placed on cast members and attempts to create drama between them by producers. She told the community that she was given instructions not to change her appearance significantly, so that producers could juxtapose moments that were entirely separate together to create a moment that never existed. In response to these rules, she cut her hair into a pixie cut, angering producers. She discussed that the interviews with cast members shown on the program were conducted with the aim of getting cast members to dislike each other or react to events that they were not there to witness. These revelations caused some board members to backpedal, and others to fade away completely. One poster spoke of their regrets:

> Personally, the only post I regret is when I expressed my horrification at the prospect of Jamie and Melissa having children together. A nasty thing to say, for sure, and I cringe at my callousness…

A few, however, did try to defend the members' criticisms:

> Many of the meanest, most hateful posts on this site have been about the inept editing and lack of continuity of the show. To … learn that the producers were actually TRYING to achieve some continuity strikes me as just so sad, seeing as how they've failed miserably in that endeavor. It's just a shame that BMP has taken a concept that used to be at least a little bit genuine and turned it into a soap opera by putting together casts that can't get along and then exploiting that situation for the sake of our entertainment.

Another member informed the group of the producers' background in soap opera:

> In an interview with *Fortune* magazine, Mary-Ellis Bunim said her background was in soap operas, so that would explain the story arcs, cliff hangers, conflicts, one-dimensional character development and desire for romance. One of the questions in a *Real World* book was is the *Real World* a documentary or a soap opera. Due to the editing and interviews, I'd have to say soap opera.

One member discussed how Melissa and Kelley's appearance on the boards at *TWoP* made them understand the impact their criticism had:

> Even though they're nominally documentary subjects, we tend to view and discuss them as we might the characters on a particularly trashy fictional

> show. Then when they actually show up and start interacting with us, it drives home the point that, as artificial and contrived as the show itself can be, the cast members are real young adults with feelings and insecurities, and even when people paint a target on themselves and all but put the knife in my hand, I try to avoid intentionally making hurtful remarks about actual people. So I'm still mulling that over. But I'm with everyone else—I'm not going to do a 180 on the issue, because coming here and making snarky comments after the episodes *is* fun, and we'd all get bored if it became too much about mincing words.
>
> Seeing Melissa's and Kelley's posts on this board have just reminded me of why I never, ever, ever want to be famous (unless it is for making some fabulous scientific discovery or something). I consider myself to be a secure woman, but if I were to log on to the Internet and see random strangers making cutting remarks about me, I can't deny that it wouldn't hurt.
>
> I, for one, have had my opinion changed about both Melissa and Jamie in some ways by Melissa's posts here. I don't think that I'm the only one.
>
> And even if I didn't have my mind changed in some ways, I still think it's interesting to get another perspective. I'm not saying that I completely believe, for example, that Jamie is a great person. But Melissa's comments do have me thinking now when I see him onscreen, and at the very least, questioning the context of what I see.

Recapper and moderator Kim interviewed Melissa for the site, and in the wake of the interview advised that posters should be aware that their posts may be viewed by cast members. One poster responded:

> Kim—I agree that it makes you think twice before posting. Not to get too touchy-feely, but maybe that's a good thing. If you think that you might be called on a comment you make, maybe you'll make sure it's a defensible position before posting it—or at least make sure that you have reason for your opinions instead of just making a quick snarky comment. I think that overall that leads to more interesting conversations here on the boards, and more reasoned debate, instead of name-calling, which I'm not a big fan of anyway.

Still, there were those who felt the need to defend even the worst forms of criticism against Kelley and Melissa, arguing that their claims of being edited into characters are just claims:

> Reallymelissa and reallykelley—despite the amoral editing—never built up the kind of general animosity or contempt that a few RW'ers have done. They've been trashed but in a way that's always struck me as comparatively

> (and I do stress the word 'comparatively') mild. And I do think that's a credit to who they are on the show and how Melissa in particular has handled herself on the boards. Rightly or wrongly, a few cast members from other seasons have struck me as so deluded and/or narcissistic that I'm just not convinced they'd have anything interesting or grounded to say (and I don't consider Flora one of them! I got a big kick out of her). But I'd love to be proven wrong.

The idea that posters should "think twice" before posting was problematic for some, who were uncomfortable transitioning from thinking of cast members as "people" rather than "characters." In addition, there were those who seemed to not care whether their criticism was hurtful at all:

> First and foremost, I agree with Kim's comments: "they are adults, and they did put themselves on this show. You should feel free to say what you want, even if it's critical…."
>
> Real worlders set themselves up for whatever consequences that may result from them being on the show. It's naive for any real worlder to expect that there will not be any negative reactions to their performance on the show.
>
> While it may be wise and perhaps compassionate to think twice before posting a critical comment about a real worlder, I don't think that posters should feel obligated to think twice. If a poster has a genuinely negative reaction to what he/she saw in an episode, then that poster should feel free to translate his/her negative reaction into a critical comment.
>
> It's not the poster's duty to avoid the possibility of hurting anyone's feeling. If a poster's legitimate comments happens to hurt someone's feeling, or conversely is full of praise, so be it.

Still, some felt that it was important to directly appeal to Kelley and Melissa and offer them advice and support:

> To ReallyKelley & ReallyMelissa: just because someone writes or says something about you, that doesn't make it the truth. Mind you, that cuts both ways in that one person's opinion about you may be that you're phony or fabricated, while another person may say/post that you are the coolest, most genuine and perfect person to ever have graced TRW. Just because you see it in print doesn't make it the truth. There's no point in rushing to your own defense (although I understand completely that it's a natural human reaction to do so) to deny some rumor that you've read/heard about yourself—YOU know the truth, and therefore, you also know that anyone reporting

> anything other than what you know to be the truth is pretty much talking out their ass.

And then there were the few voices who claimed the whole mess was not worth getting angry over because it's "just MTV:"

> As much as I disliked the portrait that the BM producers painted of Miami-Melissa, I have to agree with the statement that was attributed to her in this thread: it's just MTV. Get over it. Those who have appeared on TRW have doubtlessly experienced some form of benefit from it, so naturally, there's also going to be some detrimental aspects to it, as well. That's just the way the yin and yang of the Universe works. After all is said and done, most of us who post here and enjoy the Hell out of the snarky recaps, will continue to do so, long after the ReallyMelissas and ReallyKelleys have faded from our memories. Next season, we'll all be here capping on someone else.

For posters such as the one above, the site's purpose was not healthy debate or introspection, or understanding television; it was about criticism for the sake of criticism, about finding negativity at all costs to fuel the fire. These voices did not normally go unchallenged, however, and the poster above was directly challenged:

> People say it's "just" MTV, but MTV is not exactly a dinky local channel that no one watches, and show me a 22 year old—or even a 42 year old—who would not care what audience after audience after audience thinks about them, especially when there's a forum like the Internet (which the original RW cast did not have to deal with) on which to gleefully shred them apart.

Many members tried to couch the event in terms of a learning experience, and welcomed the entrance of more cast members to the boards:

> I really enjoy having cast members post here because a large part of my fascination with the show has to do with how the show is put together. I've never had the opportunity before to get any other perspective besides the one that is presented on Tuesday nights at 10. I think it's really cool to get another perspective.
>
> That doesn't mean that I have to believe the version presented by the cast members any more than I accept the version presented by BMP. But it's nice to have some options.
>
> If cast members want to step up and give *their* perspective on things, all the more power to them. I think a lot of people—I know I do—alter their

> opinions or change their mind when presented with new information. They just might not admit it. At any rate, it's good to gather all the information you can, from all the different perspectives that you can, in order to make up your own mind. And some perspectives are more valuable—more honest and informed—than others.

More than anything, the entrance of Melissa and Kelley to the discussion and Melissa's willingness to be interviewed by *TWoP* forced the community to deal with the manipulation involved in television programming. One member thought that what they learned about reality programming could be applied even to news programming:

> All this discussion about shows like *Real World* and *Survivo*r may seem trivial, but when you take this deepened awareness of how "reality" is trimmed and shaped for dramatic effect and cut to fit someone's agenda, and start applying it to the news, for example, or to anything else that presents itself as True—I think it's great, because we have to keep remembering to question what we're told. The interview with Melissa made me realize that, as savvy as I considered myself to be about the media, I still get seduced by it more than I realized. And I'm not implying that what Melissa says (like about Jamie, for example) is "fact". But I do think she is a highly credible witness.

The "Melissa Moment," as I like to call it, was a turning point for the board in 2000. It was one of the earliest interactions between board members and people who were involved in the creation of television programming. It made some posters aware that their words and discussions were not in a dark corner of the Internet somewhere, but rather in a kind of broad daylight. Moments like this led to the creation of a new FAQ that directly addressed actors in television programs who found negative reviews of their work on the site:

> Q: I'm an actor or participant from a show and people are saying mean things about me! Are they trolls?
>
> A: It's hair-splitting time. You are two people on *TWoP*. You're a poster and you're a TV "character". If they are discussing the "character" they are free to say the same sort of stuff they'd say about Gil Grissom on *CSI* or Donald Trump on *Apprentice*. It's a bit weird, yes, but we can't tell people to stop saying X, Y, and Z because someone from the show is around. If it is a personal attack beyond the scope of the show, or if it becomes obvious they are just repeatedly trying to stir up shit for its own sake, then a moderator will step in.

Still, the lessons learned by the Melissa Moment did not stem the tide of people who wanted to come to the boards for the purpose of angry criticism aimed at reality cast members. Like Jonathan Gray's account of Omarosa anti-fans in *The Apprentice* boards, casting moral judgments using (vitriolic and inflammatory language) on reality show cast members was not unusual, and were generally not as tolerated in boards for scripted narrative programs like *Buffy* or *The West Wing*. That does not mean that critics of those scripted programs did not engage in "anti-fan" behavior.

"Fan-tagonism" and the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* Boards

Gray's discussion of "anti-fans" seems to demarcate them from disgruntled fans or disenchanted fans that have love for the text, but seem to find more wrong with it than right. However, he argues that, "fans can become anti-fans of a sort when an episode or part of a text is perceived as harming a text as a whole, as for instance with Star Wars fans at the self-explanatory www.jarjarbinksmustdie.com."[15] That area between fan and anti-fan is a place where a lot of *TWoP* posters in the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* boards found themselves in the sixth and seventh seasons of the show's run. The kinds of criticisms waged at the writers, actors, and producers of the program were vitriolic and sometimes quite hateful. Derek Johnson refers to this practice as "fan-tagonism" or, "ongoing, competitive struggles between both internal factions and external institutions to discursively codify the fan–text–producer relationship according to their respective interests."[16] He too saw fan-tagonism amongst *Buffy* fans when began to scrutinize the work of executive producer Marti Noxon.

The *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* message boards were frequented publicly by show writer Drew Greenberg. Though not a contributing poster (or at least not admittedly so), head writer Jane Espenson discussed the importance of the *TWoP* community on her own blog. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a series about a woman destined to fight demons and vampires, was about to enter its seventh season on the heels of the limited strength of the previous season, which was considered poorly executed by many posters in the *Television Without Pity* community. Their discussion centered on their disappointment with the new season's writing, but it was also peppered with hope that the new season would bring improvements. Even within the hopeful atmosphere, the negativity over the direction of the program permeated the boards.

In addition to calling out to the production teams, posters were also remarking to each other that many of the complaints made by the community last season were being acknowledged within the new story lines. An overall feeling of hope and excitement pervaded the *Buffy* boards at the beginning of the seventh season. Many had been unhappy with the sixth season and blamed executive producer Marti Noxon for the trajectory of the story arcs. In a 2003 interview with Grace Bradberry for *The Guardian*, Sarah Bunting noted that, "Marti-bashing is the national sport of *Television Without Pity*'s *Buffy* boards," And that, "the things that people say about her are sometimes extreme—but that's the Internet for you."[17] Noxon was known in several message boards around the web as "Marti Noxious" and "Queen of Darkness" for her work during a season that dealt with very dark themes and dark times for the heroine.

Derek Johnson found similar antagonism toward Noxon in his study of *Buffy* fandom. He argued that,

> While it is unclear whether such critics were unwilling to accept a woman as Whedon's show-running successor, the female Noxon was nevertheless assigned the blame for the series' perceived dalliances in devalued, feminized storytelling forms (despite the series' prior melodramatic leanings). Even fans who admired Noxon held her, for better or worse, responsible for both the quality of that season and any problems perceived during Whedon's absence.[18]

In the seventh season, Noxon's writing and directing was notably absent, and show runner Joss Whedon helmed many of the first episodes. One *TWoP* poster wrote, "Already Joss is trying to undo some of the awful damage Marti [*Noxon*] did last season," viewing his heavy presence as an acknowledgment that her tenure the previous season had failed, just as the community at *TWoP* had surmised. The end of the first episode introduced the new villain for the season, a shape-shifter who took the form of every major villain from the past 7 years. Some of the posters noted that bringing back the kind of villains the show had in its heyday had been a request of the *TWoP* posters from the previous season. According to many, even the new scenes in the opening credits were an indication that this season was going to be better than the last. By the fifth episode of the season, a poster remarked that the writers had "managed to fit months, if not years, of [a] debate that occurred on *TWoP* in [a] 5 minute [scene]." She commented: "Granted, it was impossible to cover all the nuances, but key

points got made." *Buffy* complaints were redressed in other ways as well. Buffy's little sister Dawn had been one of the most hated characters in the previous season, and in season seven, Dawn became more interesting and endearing, at least to the community at *Television Without Pity*.

One of the major points of contention on this message board was the lack of attention to continuity by *Buffy* writers. For instance, characters might be discussing their plans a few feet away from vampires who, according to the mythos of the series, have a keen sense of hearing. Or, even more commonly, moral judgments made against one character by the narrative are not similarly made against another. The first five episodes of the seventh *Buffy* season addressed major continuity issues discussed often among the community at *Television Without Pity*. In the first episode, the gang begins to communicate with cellular phones, which pleased the boards to no end. Many a death had occurred on the show because of the lack of cell phone communication, and it had been a complaint among the users for several years. One prolific poster wrote, "Cell phones! An idea from seasons past!" These changes could have been a result of a variety of fan boards on the web making the same connections and pointing out the same problems. It is difficult to attribute such things directly to the community at *Television Without Pity*, However, it stands to reason that a such a high-profile website geared around criticism rather than adulation might have been consulted by writers interested in qualitative responses to specific storylines. The sheer number of respondents to a given episode of Buffy on *TWoP* was staggering. Generally, an hour or so after one evening's airing, several hundred posts were already available to view.

The big cliffhangers from the previous season were "Will Buffy find out that Spike (a vampire) now has a soul?" and "Will Willow be able to overcome the fact that she tried to kill all her friends and destroy the entire world in a fit of black magic vengeance?" These were, miraculously, dealt with in the first three episodes of the season. Many members noted that the tendency of television shows, and this one in particular, was to drag those kinds of story lines out over most of the season. One prolific poster wrote, "I cannot express in words how glad I am that Buffy learned about Spike's soul in episode two. Last year, she wouldn't have found out until February sweeps." The community seemed to be very comfortable with the working terms of the television industry. Though most of my college students know the term "sweeps week" is associated with television, only a few each semester know what sweeps week means for networks and individual television programs. *Television Without Pity* members informed

newer members about terms whenever a question came up, educating alongside critique. Many members were aware of the level of corporate manipulation in network television narratives, and they pointed it out to others, sometimes even campaigning against certain elements.

Even some of the good elements of this new season churned up a lot of the anger over the previous season. Willow's reintroduction also addressed some complaints that were the bulk of the comments made in the previous season. Many viewers thought that her character's 'addiction' to magic was not the best route to take; posters often noted that Willow's problem was not an addiction to magic (that is, magic is not like a drug), but a problem with abusing power. In the first recap of the season, *Television Without Pity* recapper Sep wrote,

> Giles [said], "It isn't a hobby or an addiction. It's inside, you know, this magic." Okay, on the one hand, *thank you*, Giles! Of course it's not an addiction. That's what Ace and I were saying all last season. On the other hand, huh? If it's not an addiction, what the hell were we watching with the physical withdrawal and the sage stealing and everything last year? Gah. This is a great dilemma for a recapper: do I just accept the retcon that puts everything the way I want it, or do I express disgust at one single line obliterating everything I had to sit through last season? [19]

Sep's argument was reiterated in the boards, where members argued over the reframing of the addiction storyline until they needed to be redirected:

> I can't believe it took this long for Giles, GILES, to explain this to Willow.
>
> They had to know this addiction theme was misplaced. We were harping on it for a whole season!
>
> One the one hand, yay they were listening to us, but on the other, what took you so long?

The board moderator stepped in to explain that the discussion of that storyline was more appropriate for the boards from the previous season, but the tenor of unhappiness remained.

Users were quick to point out expository scenes, which they felt were strictly for new viewers and thus a waste of their precious plot/character development time. Site recap writer Ace wrote, "I suddenly realize I am watching an episode of *Buffy* for Dummies. This entire scene is clunky exposition for a brand new viewer." Fellow recap writer Sep noted, "Is *Buffy* really drawing in enough new viewers this season to make this sort

of exposition necessary?" The posters' remarks indicate that many in the community are knowledgeable about television's narrative structure and perceptive about the motives of the creators of shows.

In addition to complaints over narrative structure and story arcs, there were other specific complaints that implied the members cared about of the lack of minority characters on television. The introduction of an African-American high school principal caused quite a stir in the *Buffy* message board community, because after years of begging for more minority characters, they were not optimistic. Characters of color in the series' past had not fared well by the season's end. That, combined with the fact that every Sunnydale High School principal had been killed, left one poster to remark: "It would disappoint me greatly to have yet another minority character be evil and/or murdered." Another wrote, "the new principal is likely to die because (A) principals on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* usually die, and (B) he's black." At the mid-season mark, Principal Wood's motives were still suspect and many feelings of frustration pervaded the posts of the *Buffy* boards. *Buffy* writers did not enter into the discussion on the site. The show had its own very active message board, *The Bronze*, which was frequented by writers and producers. However, as mentioned previously, there was evidence that writers knew about and/or read the discussions on *TWoP*—most notably writer Drew Greenberg as well as one of the major contributors to the last few seasons of the show, Jane Espenson, who discussed the site on her personal blog.

Writers like Espenson (who wrote for shows such as *Gilmore Girls* and *Battlestar Galactica*) have argued that *TWoP* encouraged viewers to become more critical and discerning. She wrote on her blog in 2006 that watching bad television is an important exercise for the viewer, and that the posters on *TWoP* have "a brutal way of cutting to the heart of a script writing mistake that can be very helpful to those of you wanting to get into the habit of watching critically." For Espenson, better television comes from such sharp criticism, and that though she notes it is "a bit painful" for the creators to read, it is valuable. [20]

TWoP offered a space for negative criticism outside the traditionally perceived "fan" experience. Even though many of the posters in the *Buffy* boards loved the show and considered themselves fans, many no longer loved the show and wanted a place to explore just why it was not giving them what they needed. This was not a place where a moderator would intervene and say, "it seems like you just don't like this show, so maybe you should go elsewhere." As one member succinctly put it, "It's the

discussion and the analysis that becomes addictive, even after the show becomes disappointing." Though occasionally someone would claim that there was too much complaining going on after an episode, there were always posts like this one: "I think people who are moaning and complaining about things (like me!) * are * still having fun! It's fun to bitch." Another argued,

> I think that if I hadn't found *TWoP*, there's a good chance I'd no longer be watching the show. I just think the quality has gone way downhill and I'm bored. I'm fairly certain BtVS would no longer be "appointment television" for me if I didn't have to analyze every second in order to keep up with y'all.

This group of disappointed fans was no less acerbic in their criticism than the anti-fans in the reality television boards, but there was a marked difference in tone with regard to moralistic judgments of character actions. Though the *Real World* boards would pepper their judgmental asides with terms like "bitch" and "whore," the same terminology was not as easily applied in the *Buffy* boards. In the discussion of an episode entitled "Same Time, Same Place," one member argued that Buffy "really has become a cold hearted bitch." After a bit of discussion over whether or not Buffy's behavior qualified as "bitchy," the tide turned against the use of the term. One member argued,

> You know, I'm wondering how much of this Buffy hate on this issue has to do with internalized sexism. A strong, assertive heroine, who is doing her best to preserve herself and her family is labeled a "bitch" for not risking her emotional well-being on an unstable vampire.

The same member also argued that Buffy's behavior was not all that different from the behavior of several male characters on the show, and yet they were not as criticized, nor given the label of "bitch" for their actions. Other members chimed in, arguing that the term was not a useful one for their community.

Regardless of the type of programming under discussion, rudeness and vitriolic language were always also up for criticism. Though some message boards had more negative criticism for programs than others, when contested terms were used in posts, the community discussed the merits of those terms in the context of real people and television characters. And when members got out of line, they were reported or reprimanded by site administrators.

Though not anti-fans, these very disgruntled *Buffy* fans illustrate the struggle between viewers and creators, and the need for a space for negative criticism like *Television Without Pity*. Derek Johnson saw this vitriol and argued that though we "might be tempted to call these viewers 'anti-fans,'" what they are doing is "symptomatic of fandom, not anti-fandom." He argues that "fans may hate the current status quo, but their intense feelings and continued contribution to fan discourse stem from pleasurable engagement with the diegetic past."[21] In traditional fan environments, factions such as these might be ousted because their displeasure had become too great. At *Television Without Pity*, however, it was business as usual.

Conclusion

Television Without Pity was much more than just a collection of angry trolls who yelled at their televisions and railed against television writers online. Whether they could in retrospect be termed television critics, fans, "fantagonists," or "anti-fans," the members of *Television Without Pity* were a community. Like any community of critics, there were individuals with empathy and positivity, but the site also had its share of hostile critics. Nonetheless, because of the atmosphere of community and discussion, these harsh critics were asked to think about their claims, and held accountable for their words. In 2013, publications such as The *Hollywood Reporter*[22] and *Entertainment Weekly*[23] published articles on a "new trend" among television audiences: "hate-watching." Watching a program for the purpose of mocking it or deliberating its faults, hate watching was *not* a new trend in 2013. Though the term was not used much in its heyday, the practice was a cornerstone of the approach to most programs on *Television Without Pity*'s roster. Well before 2013's new trend, *Television Without Pity* provided a space for those who wanted to hold "bad" people and "bad" television accountable.

Notes

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3. Grace Bradberry, "Get A Shave, Carter," *The Guardian*, 4 January 2003, accessed 20 September 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2003/jan/05/features.review47
4. Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: Television Without Pity and Textual Dislike," *The American Behavioral Scientist* vol. 48 no. 7, (2005), 840.
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7. David Denby, *Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009) 5.
8. David Denby, *Snark: It's Mean, It's Personal, and It's Ruining Our Conversation*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009) 11.
9. Alex Wexelblatt "An Auteur in the Age of the Internet: JMS, Babylon 5, and the Net" in *Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture*, Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson, and Jane Shattuc, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 209.
10. Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: *Television Without Pity* and Textual Dislike," *American Behavioral Scientist* vol. 48 no. 7, (2005), 845.
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12. Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: *Television Without Pity* and Textual Dislike," *American Behavioral Scientist* vol. 48 no. 7, (2005), 849.
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14. Jonathan Gray, "Antifandom and the Moral Text: *Television Without Pity* and Textual Dislike," *American Behavioral Scientist* vol. 48 no. 7, (2005), 850.
15. Jonathan Gray, "New Audiences, New Textualities: Anti-fans and Non-Fans," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, v. 6, no. 1 (2003): 72.
16. Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 287.
17. Grace Bradberry, "Get A Shave, Carter," *The Guardian*, 4 January 2003, accessed 20 September 2006, http://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2003/jan/05/features.review47

18. Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 292.
19. "Retcon" is short for "retroactive continuity" and is a narrative device that attempts to reconstruct or reinterpret past events by introducing new information. Often it can be quite drastic, such as when *Dallas* writers "retconned" an entire season by revealing that it was a dream.
20. Jane Espenson, "Bobbing for Bad Apples" *JaneEspenson.com*, last modified 18 June 2006, accessed 20 September 2006, http://www.janeespenson.com/archives/00000129.php
21. Derek Johnson, "Fan-tagonism: Factions, Institutions, and Constitutive Hegemonies of Fandom," in *Fandom: Identities and Communities in a Mediated World*, (New York: New York University Press, 2007): 293–94.
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CHAPTER 6

"Network Interference": Policing Conversation and Political Discourse

Like any large online community, *Television Without Pity* had widely varying opinions on many topics that broach political themes. Whether they were talking about politics on television or around the institution of television, the members made clear connections between their entertainment and real-world issues. At the same time, these discussions were often managed and controlled. In this chapter I explore the ways in which members of the site negotiate the murky area of political discussion in a message board about television. I explore the power the *TWoP* community felt they had as a community. I ask, in what ways was participating in the discussions on these boards transformative? How did they feel about the impact they may have had on the programs they discussed? Agency is expressed through democratic participation, so ultimately this chapter conducts a democratic analysis of the structure of the site itself (its rules, administration, and ownership) and argues that the site, like most businesses created around media products, privileged the production of consumers rather than citizens, particularly after its purchase by Bravo.

Politics on the Internet

The Internet has been praised as inherently democratic by some. An equalizer of sorts where individuals can no longer see identifiers of difference and each voice has an equal shot at being heard. The praise that the Internet has received (especially in the humanities) is partly a result

S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50000-7_6

of intellectuals distancing themselves from technophobes and alarmists, but web scholar Matthew Hindman questions this optimism in his work, *The Myth of Digital Democracy*. He argues that most scholars do not want to overly negate the Internet's value and that "to say that the Internet is a democratic technology is to imply that the Internet is a good thing." For these optimists, "the Internet is redistributing political influence; it is broadening the public sphere, increasing political participation, involving citizens in political activities that were previously closed to them, and challenging the monopoly of traditional elites", as well as amplifying the voice of the ordinary citizen.[1] He notes that scholarship on public opinion has often drawn a "sharp distinction between the political elites (including journalists) who craft and disseminate media messages, and the mass public that receives them," and that the Internet does blur some of those distinctions. But ultimately, political discourse on the Internet is subject to a variety of hierarchies that mirror older forms of communication. Not only is the technology not as widely available as it should be to qualify as "democratic," the tools used in creating and managing online discourse, according to Hindman, "nurture some democratic values at the expense of others."[2]

Zizi Papacharissi's work, *A Private Sphere: Technology in a Digital Age* posits that, "online discussions are often dominated by elites and seldom extend to the offline sphere of interaction." And further argues that, "the internet is a mass medium, and thus susceptible to the same type of control and commercial concerns that normalize the content of traditional media, thus reinforcing, rather than challenging, the existing political culture." An important aspect of how *Television Without Pity* regulated discourse is visible in an assessment of its often highly praised rules of conduct.

Rules for Polite Behavior

Most message boards have general rules in order to establish a framework for discussion and help keep it moving. Television network website forums have their own extensive rules that protect their copyright and establish legal consequences for breaking such rules. But *Television Without Pity* had an extensive set of rules for conduct that affected the construction of each post in discussion. I often asked my students to analyze online message board rules as part of the "new media" section of my course on US popular culture. I then showed them *TWoP*'s rules and asked them to compare them. In 7 years evaluating message boards, my students were

overwhelmingly surprised by (and sometimes impressed by) the myriad of rules for discussion and the visible ways in which they were enforced.

Television Without Pity's founders and site recappers prided themselves on the rules. In interviews with me and with journalists throughout their run at the site, many related that they felt the rules were instrumental in creating an analytical and critical discussion of television that would invite a kind of intellectual contributor. As with many highbrow pursuits, there was the marked dislike of overabundant advertising. Not by the site, of course, since that was how most free online communities brought in revenue, but there was no toleration of advertising by site members. Posts were not to have signature lines that linked to personal websites, nor were private solicitations allowed. There were also rules about proper spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Posts in all caps or all lower-case letters were immediately noticed and commented upon by both the moderators and the community. Often the poster was encouraged to edit the post to reflect the site rules.

The goal was to create a certain kind of discussion that would separate the site from a "typical fan" site, a term that founders Sarah Bunting, David T. Cole, and Tara Ariano initially seemed to disdain.[3] In my interview with Cole, he made a point to separate the site from fandom:

> Our fandom was less "blind fandom" and more "tough love" fandom. That's the tone we took and it's what attracted other people. A critical eye, not academically critical, which is what a lot of TV writing has turned into in the past few years, more like, "I want the shows I watch to be good, and when they're not I'll let them know," rather than, "I will always love this show forever and ever. They can do no wrong." Which is a kind of fandom that I do not like and cannot abide, I think it's a little poisonous to the quality of television …. We deserve better.

Journalists who interviewed them often approached the site as a fan site, and the founders went to great lengths to show that the site was organized around criticism rather than praise, making it something other than a traditional fan site. Many of the site recappers like Stephanie Lucianovic were not part of fan culture and saw the site as something altogether different:

> It was the ONLY fan community I really knew anything about. I guess I'd say it was different because even as fans of TV, we weren't blind to the faults of TV or the shows we loved. We wanted those shows to be better than they often were and we said so. We didn't simply accept whatever the show gave as wonderful just because we liked the show.[4]

The idea that fan discussion is deemed not critical or analytical has a long history, charted well by fan studies scholars. The stigma attached to those who discuss a topic so unserious as television seemed evident in the groundwork laid by *TWoP*'s rules of conduct, which used a lot of the rules associated with classic academic institutions. There were rules that put emphasis on proper spelling and grammar, polite behavior in discussion, refraining from emotional outbursts or heated discussions, discussions were required to be organized around a specific topic, and there were frequent admonitions to not get too personal and maintain a sense of objective distance. There was a distinct sense of "adult conversation" that the administration attempted to cultivate. It resonated with a lot of people who were tired of message boards where discussion devolved into personal insults and puerile jokes. In an interview with Nicole Neroulias for *Columbia News Service*, site co-founder Sarah Bunting argued that there is a higher purpose to the rules about conduct. In addition to the removal of solicitations and advertisements from posts, she says:

> "We hold our posters to a high standard," she says. "We're trying to create an atmosphere that's polite and respectful—well, not necessarily toward the shows—but we're trying to enforce sensibility and remind people not to be rude."[5]

And ultimately many of the community members I interviewed praised the board for the rules. When asked if they liked the policies for posting on the site, I received overwhelmingly positive responses:

> I get very annoyed trying to read other place's boards with their funky spellings (it also gives me a headache) and the nasty comments other boards allow to go on ALSO give me a headache. I come here for enjoyment, not to get stressed out by all the confrontation going on.
>
> If you want to read l335sp3ak and flames, you have lots of boards to choose from. I like the site's *ideals*.
>
> I like the fact that people can agree to disagree, or, when they can't, a moderator steps in and things get back to "normal" quickly.
>
> I like the proper spelling/grammar usage most of the time, lack of icons and smiley faces.
>
> Proper spelling makes reading the posts infinitely easier … For the most part, the polite conduct rules are good as well.
>
> Whenever I wander to other message boards, I'm always slightly shocked at the tone of the discourse. I like that *TWoP* is so civilized.

Indeed, the word that came up most often in my interviews about the tone of *Television Without Pity*'s discussions was "civilized." Overly "fannish" behavior was discouraged even if it was about the site or other members of the community. This is in part why the "no talking about the boards on the boards" rule came about. This rule attempted to make the community refrain from discussing the community or its administration. Here is a direct excerpt from the site FAQ page:

> Talking about the boards is pretty self-explanatory. Some examples would include starting a self-congratulatory thread praising yourself and your fellow posters on your wit, good taste, and pleasant aroma; derailing the discussion in one thread by discussing another thread; starting a thread devoted to the funniest posts on the board, threads you've started that haven't been successful, or which posters you'd like to hook up; or complaining about board policy (for instance, whining that a thread you started got closed, complaining that a moderator is too harsh, etc.). The reason we ask that posters not discuss the boards on the boards is that this is a site about television, and the discussion should remain about television—or about something of substance. Once the discussion stops being about something, and starts being about the site and each other, it's very easy for the site to slide into irrelevance. If you want to tell another poster how funny or great s/he is, or how much you'd like to see him/her hook up with another poster, or whatever, you may certainly email him/her to say so.

Perhaps the most telling statement in that explanation was that "once the discussion stops being about something, and starts being about the site and each other, it's very easy for the site to slide into irrelevance." Community building is what many people who came to the site were interested in, and certainly the founders wanted to cultivate that, but as the site became a business, there was an emphasis put on its use-value outside the community, much like a product. The argument about what *Television Without Pity* was *for* would prove to be a problem between many members who saw themselves primarily as part of a community, and the site administration, who also saw the site as a community/product.

Most of my interviewees liked most of the rules *in theory*, but when they discussed how they were enforced, their responses were less congratulatory:

> I think there is a certain lack of consistency between the moderators. This results in some people being given warnings or banned for infractions that another moderator wouldn't deem inappropriate.

> I always thought it was funny how it's okay to talk about the boards on the boards so long as it's complimentary. Anyone with a dissenting opinion is smacked down by either posters, mods, or both.[6]

By 2005, *Television Without Pity* was boasting millions of page views a month and was able to pay a rather large stable of moderators/recappers to write for the site. The association with Yahoo as an investor allowed the site to grow in size as well as popularity. The site had been mentioned in popular national newspapers and magazines, and had become a topic of discussion amongst network players.[7] But the tenor of discussion in some of the most popular message boards began to change. As a member of the community myself I saw this happening, but it was also a change that was noticed by many of those I interviewed as part of this study. The enforcement of site rules by moderators was becoming an issue with even the older members of the community. What once was deemed crucial to a kind of highbrow intellectual discussion of television was now seen as a tool for the powerful to control discussion. Stephanie Lucianovic said, "People loved us for working hard to keep the boards civil and free as possible from trolls but people also hated us for being so strict."[8]

There were a few looming accusations that some moderators who disliked the opinions of certain posters were much harder on them when it came to doling out punishments. The fact that moderators were also recappers was another stressor on the situation. Founder David T. Cole says that in retrospect, he would not have put writers in the position to moderate discussion over their work:

> Honestly, one of the dumbest things we ever did was having the people who wrote the recaps keep up on the forums for the shows, moderating those boards. That was crazy making for them. It was a lot of work, nobody likes to be a referee and nobody likes a referee. They were moderating the shows and people were talking about their recaps. So, could they be good moderators when people were talking about their content?

The partnership with Yahoo alleviated some of that tension, as they were able to add employees to the payroll who were strictly moderators, but that too had its problems.

The large influx of members also created what some viewed as incredibly biased discussions that effectively shut out dissenters. Moreover, the rule against discussing the boards on the boards made it difficult for members to vent their frustration or even mention what they saw as a real

problem. That same year, two popular message board websites sprung up in response to what many felt were unfair and biased curtailing of discussion at *Television Without Pity*. Both are no longer active and lost to the Internet ether.

It was not long before the site *TWoPSucks* gained a healthy membership. Some came to discuss the problems with others who had gone through similar experiences, others came simply to vent their frustration and tell their stories. One poster started her debut post with an explanation of why she decided to take part in discussion on *TWoPSucks*, arguing that she's "seriously disillusioned with the way the boards have gone downhill, and since they don't provide a forum for constructive feedback, this is how a lot of us get it out of our system." Another pointed out that though *TWoP* has various "love" threads where posters can discuss the moderator/recapper's praises, there is no equivalent place for criticism. She notes that, "for writers who pump out some of the harshest criticism of people on TV on a regularly basis, they sure seem to have very thin skin." It was clear that the "boards on boards" rule was becoming a problem, and the community managed to find a way around it, even if it meant leaving the site to create the forum they needed.

Many of the posters at *TWoPSucks* continued to take part in discussions on *TWoP*, but some told stories of leaving the community behind or fearing to enter into it at all. One poster found the prospect of entering into discussion on *TWoP* terrifying. She argues that she "lurk[s] because of the sheer terror. Terror at trying to remember all the rules, terror at some of the other posters, terror at *gasp* accidentally offending someone by expressing an opinion." A *TWoPSucks* member remarked that she found it difficult to go against the current on the popular *Charmed* boards, noting she was "unmercifully attacked for posting any opinion that was unpopular." In many ways, the popularity of the site became a burden, as there were so many more voices drowning out those with contradictory opinions.

Even posters who had been a part of the community from its early *Mighty Big TV* days were feeling disillusioned with the way policies were enforced on the site. One interviewee argued that though she "loved that there was a place where you could have intelligent, spirited conversations about shows without it degenerating into flame wars." Another posted that she was concerned about, "the fact that the *TWoP* honchos have responded rudely to any constructive criticism doesn't help matters. I know a lot of old timers who have moved on because of the general

nastiness." Her frustration was also tinged with regret that she had given them her loyalty, posting, "that's unfortunate because it was these old timers (myself included) who happily emptied their wallets to keep *TWoP* afloat when things got tight. It seems that Glark, Wing and Sars have forgotten that."

Some attributed the new approach to harsher punishments as a factor of the site's growing popularity, such as a member who lamented, "the whole site seems to be a shell of what it was, bogged down in its size and draconian rules." Another likens the experience to another very much related to place and time:

> Like a favorite coffee shop or bar that's suddenly invaded by new people. They get a lot more business, but these people are just obnoxious. The atmosphere is just different. You and your friends don't enjoy it as much, and you go to other places, but it's just not the same. Maybe there isn't any place like it at all anymore. After a while some people just give up on the idea and you don't see them anymore.

It would seem that the site's popularity created a much bigger, but less cozy community. A perhaps unintended result of growth was that older members were treated like newbies, and banned for infractions in a much harsher manner than in previous years. One of my interviewees noted that in the early days, a warning from a moderator would be short, polite, and discussion would continue. This is consistent with my research of the site. As late as 2002, most contributors deemed "trolls" were ignored. In one board, moderator Kim cut off discussion of whether a post was "trollish" by simply telling posters to stop discussing it and move on with the sentence "don't feed the trolls." Moderators on the site were able to edit the posts of all contributors. In earlier years, whatever was deemed inappropriate was simply removed, but in a public way. In June of 2002 one post abruptly ends with the following message: [Edited to remove unnecessary insult.—Kim]

The new mantra was to issue warnings based on a "percentage." If you received a "20 percent" warning, you would be blocked from posting for a certain period of time, larger percentages resulting in longer periods, and eventually a ban from posting at all. The system was part of a revamp of policies as well as a new automatic system, which kept the member from logging in with their username for a pre-determined amount of time. Most of the time the blocking was done privately, by private message from moderator to poster, but not always.

Getting banned could feel like a sort of public shaming. One poster banned by *TWoP* moderator Shack saw that 3 years of great posts were no match for one problematic one: "After he banned me, Shack then posted that he thought I was 'massively stupid.' Before that, I had never so much as been warned to stay on topic by any moderator in the 3 years I'd posted there." This kind of public shaming and community self-policing had a designated space (the Troll Patrol board) and was supported by the site's administrators, but it began to happen all over the message boards. In many ways, the moderators seemed to relish punishing those deemed "trolls" publicly. Whether they were doing so to discourage future infractions, because they were extremely overworked and agitated, or simply because they enjoyed it was difficult to discern, but there was very little pity for those who broke the rules. And it was clear that moderators and site administrators wielded enormous power and were largely unwilling or unable to respond to criticism by the community.

I found one such instance of a response to a poster about the heavy hand of the moderator on the message board for the morning program *The View* in early 2007.

> Is there a thread where one can discuss the over-moderation of *TWoP* without getting banned? Seriously. I rarely post but love to come and read the snark. A lot of the threads are locked or under threat to be locked. Rachel Ray thread was locked. A. Idol thread was threatened with a lock and now this thread … again. I realize there are rules but it seems like an odd place to stifle speech. Some of the threads are interesting and the constant jumping in of "Network Executives" makes it seem like we're school children. Sorry if I offended. I did not meant to be rude, but where can we, the users voice our complaints? I'm not blowing smoke, others have said the same thing to me. Constantly getting chastised stifles the flow of the thread and makes people afraid to comment.

This post was given an immediate response by one of the moderators, who replied:

> I would suggest emailing a moderator if you're not sure why this thread keeps getting warned, except I would think it's pretty self-explanatory as every other day there seems to be a flare-up in here involving off-topic posting and posters pushing agendas instead of talking about the show. This is a giant message board with a ton of users, and keeping the threads on topic and free of bickering is our only hope of keeping a substantive conversation about the TV shows (the only topic at hand here) going. Also: It's a mes-

> sage board. If you're feeling too constrained in your ability to argue about *The View*, maybe seek a message board that better accommodates you. I mean that sincerely, not in a "get the hell out" kind of way.

Within hours the moderators response was deleted and the original poster's thoughts were replaced with, "Posts deleted—talking about board moderation is off topic in this thread, as you know." It was effectively a "change the channel if you don't like the program" response, one that was the antithesis of the kind of critical perspective the site endeavored to apply to television. When discussing the merits of *The West Wing*'s representation of women, it was characterized as debate, but when the conversation went to larger issues of sexism, racism, and political action, it was often characterized as "bickering" or "off topic."

When the Talk Turns to Politics

Television plays an important role in politics. Not only does it disseminate information the public needs to know in the form of news stories and documentaries, it also disseminates information through fictional narratives. Television normalizes certain behaviors and attitudes, and it denigrates and criticizes others. Television stories are often about important issues that affect viewers' lives, and when viewers get together to talk about those stories, they are often also talking about those issues. The *Buffy* boards are about vampires and relationships, but they also venture into definitions of womanhood, lesbian rights, rape, and the effectiveness of working within the system to make progress. The Sorkin Debacle discussed previously is illustrative of this connection between stories and lived experience, as is the *TWoP* community member who countered Aaron Sorkin's dismissive argument about television's "little stories" with, "Fiction matters. Rightly or wrongly people learn from fictional TV shows." Television programming also does its share of informing, persuading, and teaching in ways that may or may not lead to political activity. More often than not, television programming tends to reinforce the status quo, offering the idea of political change in the form of financial contribution to charities or individual acts of giving. Rarely do we see programming that encourages protests, reclaiming public space from advertisers, or confronting government institutions.

Discussion on *TWoP* was about television, but it was also often about politics. Though most of the posters I interviewed did not see themselves as involved in serious political discussion when on the boards. Moderators and other posters often stalled or censured discussion when it bordered on

what is deemed "too" political. Or perhaps political in a way that was seen as no longer discussion related to television. It was a tough line to draw, and there was a great deal of disagreement over how it was drawn by the administrators of the site.

A site member wrote about the experience of voicing an unpopular opinion.

> For example, in the *Law & Order: SVU* spoiler forum last year, a spoiler came out that one of the female characters was about to get a severe beat down. All the other posters were so … happy about it and saying they couldn't wait to see a woman get beat up on screen. Of course I know it's just a fictional character but it disturbed me to see so many people looking forward to a woman getting a beating and I said so. Got flamed like you wouldn't believe, just because I wasn't saying, "All right! This woman's going to get beat up!"

When one poster tried to respond constructively to moderator/recapper Miss Alli's latest *Survivor: Palau* recap on the boards she found that her discussion privileges were revoked. After posting this message:

> I think the recap was pretty well-written, but I think it'd be even better if you didn't write such a (I believe it was Tom) bias. A more neutral recap would be better for people who missed the episode.

She claims her post was immediately deleted and she was given a "40 percent" warning, which meant she was unable to post for over 2 weeks. After not being able to post for 2 weeks, she simply stopped posting altogether. Another member vented about leaving *TWoP*, arguing that moderators and other posters are to blame: "I refuse to be caught in a flame war on there, but it's sickening to see how this 'consensus' … develops pretty rapidly on the 'boards', and anything dissenting is smacked down, out of hand." Many of these experiences point to other community members creating an exclusionary atmosphere, but moderators were seen as just as much to blame for either allowing the behavior to continue, or for contributing to it.

Site co-founder Sarah Bunting (Sars) cut off political discussion quite specifically on *The View* message boards. This post, which was posted at the top of the forum every time a member entered into discussion, leaves little room for doubt about the role of political discussion at *TWoP*:

> Before you post in this thread, make sure you're on topic. That means that you're talking about the show in a substantive way. That does NOT mean

> that you're using the thread to get all soapboxy about the issues raised ON the show.
>
> This is not a general thread about politics, child-rearing debates, shoes, Donald Trump, or any other subject not DIRECTLY RELEVANT to the topic OF THE SHOW. If you're arguing about an issue and it's got nothing to do with 'The View' anymore, it's off topic. This is a TV site; you need to be talking about stuff you saw on TV. Otherwise it belongs on your blog.

She further argues that if members continue to break the rules (that thread was consistently venturing into political discussion), the offenders would be "banned" and quite possibly the thread would be "locked," leaving members unable to take part in discussion at all. The reference to blogs here assumed that personal blogs were places for politics and personal opinions, whereas the message boards were decidedly not. The attempt to create an atmosphere of intellectual discussion was also an attempt to separate it from the messy areas of emotion, individual experience, and connections to real world problems. At the same time that Bunting seemed to want to elevate discussion about television by taking it seriously, she often vented frustration about members who did just that:

> "I sit in this tiny apartment for hours on end, correcting people who have gone off topic about '*Survivor* 4,'" Bunting says, chuckling. "And there are definitely some people where you want to say, 'You really need to get out and get some air right now, because you're getting into a poisonous argument with people you don't even know about some minute detail about *Buffy*.'"[9]

As part of my interviews, I asked whether or not members thought *TWoP* was an appropriate site for discussing politics. The responses proved divided:

> On some level there's a fine line because many of the shows, such as *The Daily Show*, or Bill Maher's *Real Time*, even *30 Days* discuss politics and it would be impossible to make all discussions non-political. In addition many normal fiction shows provide context for political discussions on more than just current events but also gender issues, cultural issues and others. But normal discourse on *TWoP* prevents out-and-out political discussion. There is some fuzziness around the edges where you can discuss politics-as-they-relate-to-shows but not OUTSIDE of the program. However it's clear that many posters seem to be somewhat politically liberal. Conservative opinions are less frequently seen so an "I hate Bush" type opinion might be politely

> tolerated but an "I love Bush" type opinion might draw some scorn or at least more response than the former.

Another argued:

> I think if the show is about politics, or has clear political themes (like *Battlestar Galactica*), sure. Same with religion. And barring that, if someone's drawing a parallel, particularly if they are suggesting that it's intentional on the part of the writers, absolutely. Also with reality shows, the politics and religion of the participants is often on display and relevant.

Still, some were wary of political discussion online:

> Unless the show is ABOUT politics, it doesn't belong on the boards. If I go to a board, it's because I want to discuss the show, not be lectured on other people's political beliefs.

There was no consensus on this issue anywhere I went looking for results. Some firmly believed that discussing the depiction of lesbian characters on *Buffy* was not political, while a conversation about how that depiction relates to how lesbians were treated in everyday life was "off topic" and reserved for personal blogs. Others could not see the distinction and tended to find themselves at the mercy of moderators. One interviewee argued that he left *TWoP* because "all that political crap sucks over there," and that even the recappers' approach to discussing politics was a problem. He summed it up with the statement, "It's a TV site mods, leave the other shit on your personal blogs." Though he clearly disdains political discussion in the boards and in the recaps, it is interesting here that he turns the administration's own rules back on them. It illustrates the blurred line between political and non-political discussion where television is concerned.

This is not to say that the majority of posters at *Television Without Pity* were apolitical. Seventy two percent of those interviewed considered themselves "politically active" and many of the interviewees were involved in community organizing at a grassroots level. My interviewees also differed on the impact *TWoP* discussions had on their own politics. For some, the site was a place to voice their own opinions, not a place to find new ones:

> I think my political opinions were already decided before I started posting. If anything, I became better at expressing them there, but *TWoP* didn't change my opinions or anything like that.

Some found the message boards more impactful on their politics than traditional journalistic criticism:

> It made me consider some alternative viewpoints. For example, on the *Daily Show* thread there was a discussion of charter schools after the appearance of the Secretary of Education. There were some comments that were the opposite of what I believe about the topic, but they came from posters who I respect and "like", so I definitely considered the points in a way that I might not from a letter to the editor in the paper.

For still others, the site's moderators were not just denying the community a discussion of politics; they were also picking and choosing which discussions were admissible. Echoing the statements of an interviewee from earlier, one poster found that the community and the moderators tend to punish those with conservative opinions: "I'm a conservative ex-military George Bush supporter and they treated me like shit. Also they e-mail me. You can't be a republican on *TWoP*. Or a Christian either." Regardless of the political perspective of the contributor, the site's administrative approach to regulating discussions that venture into the political was viewed as problematic. One member commented that the debate was ridiculous and that, "television discussion isn't supposed to be this hard." Matthew Hindman argues that these gatekeeping functions that establish and re-establish cultural hierarchy are just as prevalent on the web as they are/were in print media. "The gates and gatekeepers remain a critical part of the information landscape, even in the Internet age."[10] In the early years of *Television Without Pity*, these conversations were happening much more often. So much so that some members felt it necessary to open up entire threads devoted to issues of representation. The prevailing mantra about political discussion hemmed them in, so finally, an alternative was created. They found the "TV Potluck" section of the site useful.

The "TV Potluck" Boards

On what could be termed the "outskirts" of the community were the "TV Potluck" boards. Statistically they got much less traffic than the program-specific boards, but they were often interesting places where conversations went off into directions that were not considered appropriate elsewhere. A majority of these boards were started by community members to explore a specific topic (related to television, of course) that allowed for a broader

discussion of the politics surrounding the production of media stories. The topics ranged from the very specific to the general, such as the "Gender on Television" board, started by a teenage member of the community, who argued:

> Basically I created this thread to have a place to vent about the problems of gender roles on television. As forward thinking as it can be sometimes, television is completely ass-backwards when it comes to portraying females; particularly teenage/pre-teen girls. Teenage girls are rarely portrayed as anything but fashion-obsessed, boy-crazed morons. For every Angela Chase or Claire from *SFU*, there are at least ten Lizzie McGuires. As a teenage girl, I feel offended that we are treated more like caricatures instead of people who think and feel just like everyone else. So come here to bitch about the unrealistic portrayals of women and men on television.

As discussed in the previous chapter, there are many instances where posters relate to each other their stories of oppression and connect them to television programs. From my survey of about 15 threads, The "TV Potluck" boards tended to be frequented by longtime posters, members who posted in a lot of different forum threads, and members who came specifically to talk politics and were not finding much response in episode-specific boards. The discussions in these boards were of a more political nature, allowing posters to make connections and point out the differences between television stories and everyday life. And though a great deal of the discussion began and ended at deconstructing representation, there were boards in which discussion was about the industry itself, including a healthy discussion of network structure and media sponsorship.

Discussions about the many ways television represented society permeated the "TV Potluck" section. And, just as with other forms of criticism, *TWoP* community members educated each other on theories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. They also used this space to rant (and occasionally rave) about specific programming when they were told they were "off topic" in episode-specific boards. The "TV Potluck" section had other spaces besides those devoted to specific representational politics, but even in those boards, representation cropped up. In the "New Rules for TV" thread, which was supposed to be about pointing out tired tropes and storylines, the new rules were overwhelmingly about representation. Here was just a handful:

> New Rule: No more TV shows set in major cities with just a token minority presence. If you want an all-white cast, set the show in Idaho or Vermont somewhere.
> New Rule: If the setting of your show is in a school or similarly diverse place, every single person in said place cannot be attractive and fit. Show a little love to the normal people, please. Your average looking characters cannot really be models wearing glasses and/or braces.
> New Rule: If your characters are poor, make them look like they are poor. Have them wear the same clothes twice. Have the clothes look like they are from K-Mart. The teens should not have cell phones or shiny new cars or MP3 players. People should not live in fancy apartments with antique furniture or artwork.
> New rule: Please stop assuming that all Americans view only blonde, WASPY people as attractive, thereby casting the majority of them, particularly women, as leads.
> New rule: If you must have women thin, then show them WORKING for it. And no, I don't mean being borderline anorexic or shunning everything but salads. Show them exercising, or allow them to talk about exercising, and making sound food choices. No more size 2 women eating all junk food in sight with no consequences.
> New rule: Stop making dads look stupid, not all men are incapable of existing without a woman/mom/wife.

This is a space where members expressed feelings of anger and anxiety over television's role in reaffirming stereotypes and a great deal of the conversation there was about how television stories were limited in scope and vision. Most of the "TV Potluck" boards were about television's failures, but there were discussions that explored *good* examples of representation.

Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *African American Lives*, a PBS documentary about tracing African-American genealogy back to Africa, was a topic of discussion as of the first airing in the thread devoted to representation of race and ethnicity. The program focused on slavery's erasure of black family history and ways that such histories can be reclaimed through research and technological innovations. Noting that not many people seemed to be entering the discussion at first, one member wrote, "I think we must be the only ones watching. Not widely advertised I guess." Another balked at the slow pacing of the documentary, but soon the discussion turned to personal histories:

> I loved it too and it made me think about how little I know about my family history. I, too am from one of those black families that doesn't talk much about the family past the great grandfather stage and I was totally wanting to gather up all the stories I've heard and have them verified and take my DNA test. So I guess Gates was effective.

This member's personal revelation led to many more, all recounting tales similar to those in the documentary, but also interpreting the politics surrounding their experiences:

> I never understood how those "Indian in my family" rumors get started in our families. Ashamed of a slave past, perhaps? Or a way to take the sting out of knowing somewhere along the line, one of our matriarchs could've been cruelly violated by a slave master. You're not the only one though. Supposedly, my great-grandfather was a full-blooded Blackfoot. I'm inclined to believe that was a tall tale also.

Another wrote about the program's impact:

> Did anybody else notice the look on Gates' face when he saw his forebears referred to as property below corn stalks? I think that would be pretty shocking. We all know that that's the way people were thought of back then but to see it in black and white, in historical records, would be a punch in the gut to me.

Because the conversation took place in the "TV Potluck" boards, the outskirts of *TWoP* culture, it was not censured, even though it veered off topic in many ways. Commentary on a documentary that takes political topics head on, directed by a political intellectual, not surprisingly led to a discussion of the politics within the text. But when texts are not viewed as overtly political, the community in these forum threads was still interrogating in broad *and* specific terms, educating each other and finding solidarity. One member noted:

> TV always portrays race issues as clear-cut, when it's much more complex. Racism (years ago the term "prejudice" was also used) runs the gamut: overt to very subtle. And people are often very contradictory depending on the circumstance. But TV rarely shows these dichotomies.

When it came to issues of race, all genres of television were discussed, from evening dramas to daytime soaps:

> I don't remember how they broke up or whether it was because of viewer complaints, but I do remember that ATWT [*As The World Turns*] did a very brave thing by having Lisa object to their getting married because of the race issue. I thought it took a lot of guts for them to actually address the issue and to have it voiced by Lisa, a central character who had been around forever and thus had a strong emotional call on viewers. It meant that her

> eventual change of heart had a lot of impact. It seems like soaps are ahead of the curve, however haltingly, in showing black/white IR [interracial] relationships. Are they the same with other combinations?

Not only were they discussing the text itself, but its impact and the forces at work during its creation. In discussing the soap-opera storyline above, another community member mentioned that there had been an active letter-writing campaign against the interracial pairing, including death threats. The connection these posters drew between the text and the real world of the viewer was strong. When one member brought it to community attention that VH1 was promoting a new program entitled *TVs Illest Minority Moments*, another responded with a clear critique and a plan of action:

> I'm seriously thinking about writing to VH1 about it. By titling the show like this, it shows that VH1 is trying to make light of a serious situation and that someone who proposed the show is somehow living in the fantasy world of Hollywood where racism is a work of fiction and doesn't impact their lives even though what they're doing is racist and prejudiced.

The threads in "TV Potluck" were much more relaxed and open than threads in the more popular sections of the site. Members would often toss out questions rather than just make critical statements, opening the floor for discussion, such as this poster who wanted the community take on a specific commercial:

> What are you all thinking about the Staples "Rubber Band Man" commercial? There was some brief discussion of it in the commercial thread, but I wanted to bring it up here since I just saw it for the first time over the weekend. Cooning, or just damn funny?

There were those that came down harshly on the commercial, but there were also members who disagreed:

> I think what shines through isn't some black man shuckin' and jivin' just to entertain white audiences. It's just a guy who knows how to get down on it and he's having fun for himself. It's like that black guy from the old Joe Boxer commercials. Just because we're dancing on tv doesn't mean we're cooning.
>
> There *are* people out there with big afros and superfly dance moves. There will always be someone who embodies stereotypes because that's just

> the way they naturally are (see my favorite nellies on *Queer Eye*). Aren't we invalidating their experience by telling them they're not a positive representation of black folks? Sure we need balance but damn the brotha is doin' his thing in that commercial and I'm not mad at him.

There were also members who posted about upcoming TV programs that might be of interest to the community:

> If your cable package happens to include the obscure True network, they're currently doing several repeats of a documentary called "Hughes's Dream Harlem," about the poet Langston H. and his place in Harlem of the past and present, his connection to hip-hop, etc. Worth taping, I should think, if writing and black writers are among your interests.

Sharing and educating each other is welcomed in this area of *Television Without Pity*. When one member asked, "where can one go for news from an African-American perspective?" Another immediately responded:

> http://SeeingBlack.com is an alternative and progressive site for news, features, and reviews from a black perspective. BET, BlackVoices, and Africana are other more corporate black news and media sources.

The poster was able to not only provide a link for one source, but was able to educate about a number of voices across the political spectrum. But even in this section of the site, the fear of censure by the moderator looms. The following post was specifically about a television program:

> I get sick and tired of portrayal after portrayal of the loud, overweight, loud, ignorant, loud black woman; we're not all like that and I hate it that people seem to think it's cute with "you go girl" and all that shit.

The discussion that followed the post was about black women, self-esteem, obesity, European standards of beauty, and the mammy archetype in film and television. But since it was no longer focused on a specific television text, a member started to fear the discussion's tangent would result in censure:

> TV, peeps! :-) Not that I don't love this discussion, but this thread has been shut down once before when discussion has roamed very far off topic.

There were other topics on the site where members are quick to police each other, but this particular instance struck me as different. Yes, the poster alerted members that the discussion had moved from the topic, but she did so in a way that showed a sense of solidarity and connection to the group. The emoticon of a smiley face showed the community that there was no ill will towards the discussion, the second sentence began with a declaration of love for the tangent the discussion had taken, and the conclusion of that sentence reinforced that the threat of censure was outside the group. Indeed, it also hinted at a history of censure. Unlike other areas of the site, the conversations happening in "TV Potluck" were more introspective, and demonstrated a connection with other posters. In retrospect, a place such as this that tackles racial issues with respect and camaraderie seems like a fantasyland. For those of us who are currently denizens of the comments sections on blogs, readers of Twitter feeds, and (even more courageously) readers of major newspaper article comments, this is nirvana. There were trolls in the early days of the Internet, and there were heated arguments on *TWoP* all the time, but the "TV Potluck" boards had a much more genial environment, and to this day holds a standard for me for what Internet conversation should look like.

Even their own criticism was up for, well, criticism. When a several members started discussing the problematic notions of representation in an "Asian-American" channel, one member brought up feelings of guilt over her role in criticizing what little programming speaks to the Asian community:

> I feel a little bit guilty in criticizing and being disappointed because as it is, there is quite an underrepresentation of Asian-Americans on television and movies, so I feel that it's important for myself to be more open minded about this new channel.

The message board thread called "Gay/Bi/Straight: Sexuality on TV" also traversed similar territory, calling out inaccurate television portrayals, educating on important analytical terms, and connecting with others. This board had quite a lively discussion about a portrayal that was thought of as largely missing from the television landscape: bisexuality. One member pointed out that the meager representation is usually focused around bisexual women performing for straight men, noting that, "while bisexual representations are lacking in both quantity and quality, bisexual men

don't exist on television. "Another member responded with her/his perspective on the dearth of images of bisexual men on television:

> I think it's just the idea that bisexual men don't *exist*, period. It's kind of like the one-drop theory of sex—one homosexual experience marks a man as gay. A guy who is with both other guys and girls is generally read as in denial about his homosexuality. (Women have more leeway, although the same idea still applies.) Of course this doesn't carry over into "real life" all the time.... That probably also explains why there are few bisexuals on TV—it's better to have a character who can be labeled as "gay", but labeling someone as "bisexual", that's probably a little more than most viewers can handle (or more than the stuffy network executives *think* we can handle).

Another poster sought to include the community on an academic discussion much like their own:

> **MEDIA ALERT!** On Thursday a bunch of homosexuals and their straight friends will be on a seminar panel on The History of Gay & Lesbian Images on Television. It will be taking place in LA, **BUT** I have just been informed that it is broadcast at select universities live via satellite across the country. It will for example be broadcast at my local university—located in Sticksville, USA. Check to see if your local university will have it—sounds totally worth checking out.

Again, just like the race and ethnicity discussion, the LGBT discussion moved from specific texts to real people's non-television lives. In this instance, the discussion of the fight for gay marriage became relevant, and one poster shared her interpretation:

> I wish more people just called these protesters bigots. That's what they are. Really, if two women or men want to get married, then what business is it of anyone's? Even if you believe homosexuality is wrong, gay marriage does not effect you unless you're the ones getting married. It's not like gays make up 40 percent of the country's population! It is these so-called family-friendly groups destroying America, not the gays, with the rigid standards of family and nature.

This post was immediately quoted by another board member, with the response: "And Topic Please. Sorry mods, I just wanted say it for once!" Just as in the previous discussion, the specter of the moderator made an appear-

ance. I initially interpreted this as a form of silencing, as well as a way for the poster to align him or herself with the site's administrators. This is notable in the apology to the moderators for doing their job before they got the chance, which is in stark contrast to the previous example in the race and ethnicity discussion. The quoting of one specific post was also a way to antagonize one member and single them out for the rest of the group to view as an example. Was this a poster who disagreed with the statement about gay marriage? Did she decide to use the site rules in a way that conveniently shut down an opposing viewpoint? Possibly, but there is something that complicates this argument. The mantra of keeping politics off the boards is one that posters internalized. Not only did they get reminded of the rule by other members and moderators often, their discussions literally disappeared if the rule was ignored. Especially in fringe spaces like "TV Potluck." A *Buffy* episode thread was not likely to disappear, but a thread about broad ideas might. A delicate balance was struck in order to maintain a space they enjoyed with fellow members. In the early years of "TV Potluck," the moderators were popular writers of recaps on the site, or perhaps the co-founders. These were people the members had "known" in context of other discussions. Big changes came when the site was purchased by the Bravo channel, and one of them was the hiring of new moderators who strictly policed the boards. Not surprisingly, these conversations largely died in the wake of the change. A survey of my most studied threads in "TV Potluck" from 2000 to 2010 today showed that many of them did not have new posts in several years.

In light of this history of corporate absorption, what can be said about the power this site and its members have? When I asked interviewees about the impact of *TWoP* on television programs and culture, the responses were varied:

> There are probably minor ripples that can be felt in certain shows. *My Name is Earl*, *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*. *Rescue Me*, for example. And while some shows are more responsive to fan messages, often in those cases I feel that *TWoP* is not the sole factor in the effect, *Lost* for example. While I feel that in certain times, in certain situations, one or two shows might have something that is reflective of *TWoP*-inspired action, on the whole I don't think *TWoP* has a large gravitational pull in and of itself.
>
> None. I don't honestly believe there are writers/directors/creators hanging around the boards so therefore I don't think those people are using what is said there to influence anything. The only impact I can see is when

> letter-writing campaigns are organized and the information is provided on the boards.
>
> Yes [there is an impact on TV shows], because some of the programs' creators have said that they have.
>
> I think a little bit, I see small things in shows that are meta or in reference to comments from message boards (including, but not exclusive to *TWoP*). So I think the writers [of TV programs] are aware of it. I'd like to think that *Arrested Development* got an extra few episodes because of the efforts of *TWoP*ers.

Site co-founder Tara Ariano was also asked about the site's impact. She responded to this idea with a balanced approach:

> I don't think we ever have been willing to say for sure that we've influenced plot lines, though lots of shows are known to follow the boards and recaps. We've certainly had shout-outs—shows that have acknowledged us in some onscreen way. Phil Keoghan [who hosts *The Amazing Race*] has publicly credited the site with helping keep the show on the air during its early struggles. I think they hesitate to acknowledge a lot of our influence because, understandably, nobody wants to look like they take marching orders from the Internet.

Many of those I interviewed pointed to the letter-writing campaigns, started or passed on by community members, as evidence that the community works to tell networks directly what they want out of their entertainment. Many posters related that they knew that *Television Without Pity* was a reference point for many creators of television programs, so when a program such as *Firefly* or *Arrested Development* was threatened with cancellation, they responded with the time honored "save the show" petition or letter-writing campaign. For those new to letter-writing campaigns, there was usually an explanation of what to say and how to say it when communicating with network executives and media sponsors. These campaigns happened throughout my study of the site. Almost always, there was an emphasis on establishing not only that the show was important to viewers but that it was important to *specific kinds of viewers.* In order for your petition or letter to be of value, it was always reiterated, you must, of course, include your demographic information.

Unasked Questions

Very little discussion on the site was devoted to alternatives to the current corporate-sponsorship media paradigm. In fact, it was often seen as an unchangeable fact of television storytelling. Most of the questioning and criticism assumed that the system was something to be worked from within, and that the community could make changes as consumers. I did not venture into every corner of the site, but I do not believe there were any discussions about changing the present commercial form of television or advocating radical change in a real-world context. I searched the site many times for discussions of public access television, radical news networks like Labor Beat, Paper Tiger Television, Deep Dish TV, or even Current TV. The only discussion venturing close to these topics were in the boards about PBS documentaries and local commercials.

Conclusion

Ultimately it is difficult to see *Television Without Pity* as a site in which members have agency (in terms of being agents of change from within the community at the site). Jurgen Habermas's concept of the public forum is often used when describing the kinds of conversations happening online. Central to the concept is an "ideal speech situation," where all participants have equal voice and opportunity to contribute. Barney Warf and John Grimes argue in their article, "Counterhegemonic Discourses and the Internet":

> A powerful counterhegemonic use of the Internet is the ability to communicate intersubjective knowledge as much an attribute of hypertext as innate in the Internet. People from different places, with radically variant experiences, are able to convey a notion of what it is like to be them, to live their lives, via the Net.[11]

The nature of web technology itself already limits participants to those who can afford Internet access. Hindman argues that although the most recent information about proliferation of Internet access is better, it still leaves much to be desired if we are going to discuss the Internet as a democratic place. He writes, "While more recent data show that some gaps have narrowed, important differences remain, particularly with respect to age, race, and education," and that, "growth in the online population

has slowed dramatically since 2001."[12] But even further than the dismal news about the digital divide, if we are to look at sites such as *TWoP* as an indicator, it falls short of the democratic ideal. Site policies at *TWoP* curtailed discussion in order to maintain a kind of "civilized" intellectual atmosphere, but they also prevented a great deal of political (and social, and personal) discussion from moving forward. Those places at *Television Without Pity* where political discussions thrived were less popular and rarely, if ever, discussed when journalists or academics covered the site, giving that aspect of the site a much lower profile than the boards about specific programs, and leading to their treatment as easily expendable. The lack of popularity of the politically-themed boards at *TWoP* is important. Even if radical theories about television and its future were being discussed there, those discussions were seen by so few people that they may not have made a large-scale impact with other members. According to Hindman, "when considering political speech online, we must be mindful of the difference between speaking and being heard." His study of political discussion on the web found that "despite—or rather because of—the enormity of content available online citizens seem to cluster strongly around the top few informational sources in a given category." This enormity has drawbacks in that "most online content receives no links, attracts no eyeballs, and has minimal political relevance."[13] The discussions on *Television Without Pity*'s less attended forums may have empowered members on an individual level, but from my interviews and the data available in various boards, it would seem that the idea that viewers could demand significant changes in television had not gained much traction. Not only was there a general cultural assumption that television was not a very serious topic and politics was best left for "real" problems, there was also always the specter of domination by media conglomerates present in the very ownership of the site by Bravo. It would seem incredibly difficult to get out from under a system so seemingly entrenched and powerful that it swallowed the community whole. Indeed, the role that *Television Without Pity* plays in the "democratization of criticism" may not be as democratic as it seems.

Notes

1. Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 5–6.
2. Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 12.

3. It was pointed out repeatedly by Bunting and Cole as an insult in interviews, but also by recapper Deborah during the Sorkin Debacle, who bristled at the implication that as a fan site their criticism of Sorkin's work was not credible.
4. Stephanie Lucianovic, personal interview with author, 25 July, 2015.
5. Nicole Neroulias, "Couch Potatoes Thrive Online," *Columbia News Service*, http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/cns/2002-03-04/234.asp [accessed June 20, 2002].
6. *TWOPSucks*, www.twopsucks.com, Mar 2006.
7. Not only had the site conducted interviews with producers and writers of popular programs, those producers and writers mentioned that a lot of people working in the TV industry know about and consult *TWoP* as part of market research.
8. Stephanie Lucianovic, personal interview with author, 25 July, 2015.
9. Nicole Neroulias, "Couch Potatoes Thrive Online," *Columbia News Service*, http://www.jrn.columbia.edu/cns/2002-03-04/234.asp [accessed June 20, 2002].
10. Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 13.
11. Barney Warf and John Grimes, "Counterhegemonic Discourses and the Internet," *Geographical Review*, Vol 87, No. 2 (April, 1997): 259.
12. Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 9.
13. Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 18.

CHAPTER 7

"Permanent Hiatus": The Death of *Television Without Pity*

Whenever the site administrators decided that a television program would no longer be recapped at *Television Without Pity*, its recaps would be relocated from the front page to the "Permanent Hiatus" board, a reference to the television term. It was akin to being put out to pasture, put aside. Of course, users could still visit those boards and post in them, but the show was no longer on the active roster. When *Television Without Pity* itself was put on "permanent hiatus," entertainment journalists met it with a kind of eulogizing. Social media was flooded with goodbyes from longtime fans and former contributors. The *TWoP* era had a limited period and the corporate structures of both television and the web determined the lifespan of the site. Its size is partly to blame, but also the things that made it attractive at the outset were no longer there: good design, fair moderation style, and the fostering of community. It's memorialization by journalists and bloggers after NBCUniversal announced its death indicate that it was indeed a one-of-a-kind space where criticism, though harsh, flowed from audiences to authors, and created a supportive space for discussing the role television played in American culture.

The Bravo Deal

As evidenced by the preceding chapter, things started to change significantly after the purchase of the site by Bravo. *Television Without Pity* was no stranger to the corporate structure when Bravo, a subsidiary of NBC,

S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50000-7_7

acquired it in 2007. From 2005 to 2007, the site had collaborated with Yahoo, securing funding in exchange for an advertising venue as well as aggregate information about site members. Before the Yahoo partnership, founders Tara Ariano, Sarah Bunting, and David T. Cole had been having financial troubles maintaining the site. In September 2002, the founders announced the site was unable to pay its writers and maintain its bandwidth. They posted an announcement indicating that they were planning to close their doors but their ad broker offered them a way to keep the site alive. They had to cut shows from their recap list that did not fit their demographic. They gave more space to advertisements, and offered the community the ability to buy ad space on the site. Any site member could purchase a banner ad that would run for a specific amount of time at the top of the first page. Smaller ads were also available for ads alongside the forums. In a public post to the community, the founders stated that "in order to sustain a site this big—a site many of you visit a dozen times a day and about which you email us to detail your addiction—we need to ask you to give a little of your time, and show us what this site means to you." The community came out in force to contribute, buying ad space and contributing in the form of donations. There was even a *TWoP* Personals section launched to bring in revenue, partnered with Spring Street, a company that had success managing the personals sections of sites like *The Onion* and *Bust*.

After the near-death of the site in 2002, the founders sought out a more dependable advertising base. They found Yahoo. The details of the deal were not made public, but as a result, they were able to add to their stable of writers/moderators. Cole informed me that the Yahoo deal saved the site, but they were largely absent.

> Our deal with Yahoo was really just covering costs. Bread and cheap butter for the founders to take out of it. It wasn't a great deal for us. We were a couple hours away from shutting down the site. They did the hosting, they covered the recappers' costs, we got enough to pay rent. Yahoo was pretty absentee from that point on. Which is why we ended up looking around a couple years later. They just syndicated the content. I think they really wanted it to beef up their other sites.[1]

Maintaining the site was incredibly difficult. *Television Without Pity* was not only a very large site with a hefty user-base, it also was one of the first entertainment message boards to reach such a hefty size. Cole argued, "The difference between now and then is that back then there was really

no infrastructure for how to do anything like hosting was a couple magnitudes more expensive than it is now." The founders' new site is similar in scope, and Cole notes that today, "it costs under a thousand dollars [monthly] for a big site. Back then it cost around $15,000 to produce. The bandwidth cost a lot. So we had to bring in a lot of money each month."[2] In March 2007, Cole posted an official announcement in the "Nuts and Bolts" section, reserved for site-wide technical problems and server issues:

> *TelevisionWithoutPity*.com is thrilled to announce … drum roll … that the site has been acquired by Bravo. Officially, *TWoP* will be under the Bravo umbrella going forward—part of Bravo's larger push into online content, which already includes *OUTzoneTV.com*, *BrilliantButCancelled.com*, and *getTRIO.com*.
>
> You're probably asking yourselves, "What does this mean? How can *TWoP* still be *TWoP* if it's owned by a network?" Well, maybe you're asking yourselves who ate the last cookie, but while we can't help you with that last question, we can shed some light on the first two.
>
> For starters, it means that TWoP will still be TWoP—that is to say, we'll be offering the same no-holds-barred commentary and critique we always have. Our new bosses dig what we do, and after all, they were the ones who launched BrilliantButCancelled, the mid-season deathwatch which predicts the early demise of all the networks' new shows. So, we'll continue taking shots at Aaron Sorkin, and we'll still be covering shows on FOX and CBS and so on.
>
> But it also means that TWoP can get even TWoPpier—partnering with Bravo will give us the opportunity to expand our coverage, in all directions. We can cover more shows, and we can cover shows (and TV in general) in different ways—trend stories, blogs, exclusive interviews, audio and video content. We'll still provide snarky recaps, and you'll still be able to visit the virtual water-cooler of the forums, but you can also look forward to podcasts, episode extras, and all sorts of other neat stuff.
>
> When do all these rad changes take effect? Well, we've still got some planning to do, but we'll keep you posted. In the meantime, we'll say thanks. Our users are such a huge and integral part of what we do here, and as always, we appreciate your support. And snark.
>
> Stay tuned!

The outpouring of congratulations was tempered with a great deal of fear in the form of pointed questions about this new arrangement: "The Bravo Powers That Be aren't gonna censor any snark that goes after their shows, right?"

Site co-founder Tara Ariano responded in political terminology: "They're very committed to keeping a separation of church and state, as it were. We can snark it up as hard as we ever did." Glark also chimed in with the following in response: "Neither they nor we are interested in watering down the snark. Simply put there wouldn't be a deal otherwise." Nevertheless, this did little to stem the tide of questions and statements of concern over this change.

> Will you guys still have control over who is allowed to post in the forums? As in, we're not going to have to endure the caliber of poster who posts only at, say, the FOX.com boards, are we?
>
> Yep, one of the first things the Bravo president said to us was "I like how many rules you have" and forum moderation will continue (and we'll be adding more people to that in the middle-future).

It is not surprising that a media corporation like Bravo would find the rules of *Television Without Pity* favorable to their objectives. Not only did the rules and policies limit the kinds of questions people were permitted to ask, they also encouraged the public ridicule and censure of those who dared to challenge the system. Some posters were happy about the prospect of new ownership:

> Change generally makes me curl up in a little ball in the corner and weep, but I'm going to put my faith in Glark, Sars and Wing Chun that this will all be good and say, "I, for one, welcome our new overlords."
>
> Congratulations all around. Unlike some websites that got bought out by a corporation (TVgasm.com), you guys did the classy thing by announcing it and even starting a forum to answer questions about it.
>
> I don't blame the Network Executives at *TWoP* for securing stability (after all, no site this perfect is cheap or easy). And through their candor and savvy, the Network Executives have long ago earned my trust. So when they tell me TWoP will remain TWoP, I believe them.

Still, there were many questions about how the nature of the site (criticism of networks and television programs) fit with the new parent company (a creator of said television programs). Would it constitute a conflict of interest?

> I am a little a worried about this change. Will freedom of snark really continue in the forums under the reign of Bravo? Take *The Real Housewives of OC*

> show for instance. Bravo won't allow any negative comments to be posted on its own boards, and TWoP shut down its thread about the show after getting heat from the participants' lawyers. If Bravo is able to exert the same control it exercises over its own boards, the freedom of snark on TWoP's boards may really be in jeopardy. So I offer a hesitant congratulations.
>
> Maybe I'm too cynical or you are too naive, but from where I sit, it appears you just sold your soul to the devil for some extra frills on the site and a hefty pay-off. Of course, you have every right to sell what's yours, but I can't see the benefits will ever outweigh what you've (we've) lost in this deal. Only time will tell if your overwhelming optimism about this association is merited. To me, it seems similar to a situation where Kentucky Fried Chicken just took over the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals organization. (Does anyone have a better analogy?)

Some of the older members saw the sad reality of the online business model at *Television Without Pity,* and spoke of the site founders as if they were old friends:

> Aw honey, were you not around for the "please buy a banner ad" years? Before the Yahoo deal? When the site was on the verge of being gone forever? I can't imagine they could afford to go independent again when the Yahoo contract expired; so I'm thinking it's more sold their soul to keep the site up and themselves in groceries. But hey, if we get extra frills, I will absolutely buy a GE toaster or something to offset the cost.

After reading *TWoP*'s new terms of use under the Bravo deal, one poster remarked:"I feel like we should all be singing, 'I sold my soul to the company store, but look, they have *Monk* coffee mugs!'" Yet still others were convinced this was true success in corporate terms, "It's just another chapter in the evolution of *TWoP*—from a tiny dream into a true brand. And I say, 'bravo!' No pun intended." This particular post encapsulates precisely how viewers (and to a great extent members of the site) are encouraged to see themselves as products and celebrate their high market value. Not long after the Bravo deal, the site founders decided to move on. In a letter not from *Television Without Pity*, but from "Bravo Media," the new owners finally took full control.

> Under the editorial guidance of co-founders Tara Ariano, Sarah D. Bunting, and David T. Cole, the site reached record heights in traffic over the past year as it launched new areas featuring blogs, photos, games, and original

> video, all the while still providing fans with the best show recaps and forums on the Web. It's no wonder that it topped EW's list of 2007's best TV web sites.

In an addendum to the official announcement, the founders directly addressed the community,"It is with no small amount of sadness that we make this announcement, but … here it is: the *TWoP* founders are leaving the site. Our last day will be March 11, 2008." Cole maintained that managing the site had taken its toll, and the time spent managing it under the new ownership was difficult. It would seem that any independence the site's administration previously had was gone. He said that after the initial excitement over the sale of the site, reality set in: "We were excited because we had hoped that by selling we could do bigger and better things; video content, a version of the TV show we pitched. But you know, as soon as you sign the dotted line, it's their site. None of that happened."[3]The site had become fully absorbed by the television industry, rather than acting as a thorn it its side. This did not mean that the community no longer had a voice, nor that they were now uncritical, however, there were marked changes after the Bravo deal.

NBCUniversal's Changes

The changes ushered in after the Bravo purchase created a site that was a shadow of its former self. Cole says that the founders realized fairly quickly that Bravo's approach did not mesh with their own. One of the first changes they wanted to implement involved getting users to participate in contests. He noted that the first contest was focused on ratings, which he felt the *TWoP* community would not be interested in at all. He explained to the Bravo executives that, "people on the site would be kind of suspicious about that whole thing. Our users are over ratings, ratings are sort of the enemy. Most of the shows they like don't get the highest ratings. It's not going to hit like you expect it to."[4] Bravo insisted it would be perfect for the site and it proceeded to fail miserably.

The site's look and size immediately changed. New sections for blogs, videos, photos, and even movie discussions were added. The site started to look like an entertainment e-magazine. Not surprisingly, NBC actors from shows such as *Heroes* were "guest bloggers." Cole remembers that his departure was due largely to these changes:

> They started junking it up with all this other crap. Bait-click bloggy things, stupid contests, starting a movie site to get movie advertisers. There were a

> lot of people at NBC from portals that started to run the site, like AOL and Yahoo stuff like that, and that was sort of where it was going.[5]

The changes brought many new members to the boards, as the site could now handle much more traffic. Longtime members were largely unhappy with the changes, however. One posted a blog about the changes. Many *TWoP* members found this blog after it linked to the *Television Without Pity* Wikipedia entry. His blog post was a deeply critical and impassioned response to what he felt was the end of a community he loved. He addressed Bravo directly from the outset: "When you took over *TWoP* last year, I said I wasn't worried. Well, you showed me … this was a website that knew what it wanted to be: a collection of recaps of television shows and a place where people could talk about televisions shows." He then posted screen captures of the new website juxtaposed with an older screen capture and wrote, "You tell me that this is a website that has any understanding of what its mission is supposed to be," he argued, "Or if it even has a mission anymore." He pointed out specific problems: "Blogs with their Hulu links, pointless photo galleries, the even more pointless video log which seems to be about someone who has never watched television shows commenting on them." His ultimate assessment is one that I must say, as a fellow longtime member of the community, I agreed with wholeheartedly: "They've reduced *Television Without Pity* from a site that had a definite, unique point of view about TV—and TV's place in the pop culture universe—to a site that is just like any other entertainment site." That point of view had been connected to the original founders, and with them gone, the direction of the site seemed foreign to longtime members. The responses his blog post received were even more revealing. Each response lamented the loss of old *TWoP* while pointing out what went wrong and what they miss about the community. The additional elements to the site and quality of the recaps were of particular concern:

> Terrible layout, exhausting galleries, lackluster recaps, and the infiltration of pointless ad-savvy links … the site is a bloated, unwieldy and pointless site for Bravo. Almost every writer that had wit and talent is gone.

Some commented that the new recappers did not have the vast pop culture knowledge base that once drew members to *TWoP*. There was a desire for people who were as savvy about media as the community members, rather than what one commenter called "adver-journalists." Others

related specific experiences that shed light on the administration's new perspective:

> *TWoP* doesn't want "discussion" on their boards at all. They don't want people exchanging ideas and defending their views. On the thread I got warned in the mod posted something to the effect of "you can't win an internet argument so don't try. Just post your opinion and move on." That's exactly what they want, a bunch of standalone posts that don't reference each other, or respond to different ideas. I don't think I'm interested in that vision of a "discussion board."

In the past, posters were not allowed to advertise for their own websites, but if they wanted to have discussions that were forbidden, mentioning a specific website where that could take place was tolerated. No more. One member commented that the rule about not entering the boards until the program is over on the west coast has become a problem:

> You're not supposed to "live chat" on boards until the program is over. So I tried doing a nice thing and set up a room for people. But apparently, I was "pimping" a site. I've been a member since 2002.

Two years after the blog post, people were still coming to comment on their dislike of the new ownership. "Where did the snark go?" one member posted, while another lamented, "I used to love *TWoP*. Now I'm just embarrassed for it."

The acquisition by Bravo did result in a consistent upsurge in posts in the message boards. In 2006, the site had 5,462,436 posts, and by the next year it saw a 45 percent increase in posts. Each year it saw further increases of about 20 percent, dwarfing the numbers in the pre-Bravo days, which were low and fluctuating year by year. The influx of new members and the sheer number of conversations, as evidenced in the previous chapter, resulted in flare-ups and tension among posters, as well as between moderators and posters.

The bulk of my data collection and interviews were conducted between 2000 and 2010. In the years after the Bravo acquisition, it became difficult to keep up with the conversations about even a single episode of the most popular programs. By the morning after an episode of a popular show such as *Lost* aired, I was reviewing hundreds of pages of discussion. There started to be an increase in tension surrounding the idea of posting a criticism without reading previous posts. In today's parlance, it would

be referred to as "too long; didn't read," commonly referenced via the shorthand notation "tl;dr" on comments today. The moderators of the site had always encouraged posters to read everything before posting. This was primarily so that the conversation would not be repetitive, but also it was a way of using similar conventions from real-life polite conversation. To ignore the previous conversation and simply post your opinions as if all that came before had no relevance was (and still is) considered rude. By 2007, the rules were slightly shifted to accommodate the influx of so many posters. In the FAQ list of "dos and don'ts" the new rule read, "Don't post in a thread until you've read at least the last fifteen pages or days of content." The recappers and writers for the site had previously been more anchored to the *TWoP* community as they had been able to read each other's work and visit the message boards of various programs.

In my interview with Stephanie Lucianovic (known on *TWoP* as Keckler), she mentioned that, "Back in 1999, not only did I watch every show we recapped—I think we started with seven?—but I could read every recap and post on every show's board. Once the site got larger and larger, I couldn't do that." And so participating became more difficult as well: "The boards were huge by then and it was harder to keep up with a flow of conversation or discussion unless you never left the house." The growth was starting to cripple the sense of community there, and created a hostile atmosphere.

Pulling the Plug

Six years after the founders left *Television Without Pity,* it was finally put to rest. An announcement appeared on the site in March of 2014, a simple message that stated, "*TWoP* will cease operations on April 4, but our forums will remain open till May 31"

Most news outlets reported that three employees at the site were affected, but former recapper Pamela Ribon took to Twitter to argue that freelance writers would also be out of work.[6] The prevailing assumption was that NBCUniversal no longer considered the site a "viable business." Cole agrees:

> I wish it had ended a couple years before, because it was a corpsey, shambling zombie of a site. It wasn't growing anymore. All the stuff they tried to do to make it grow was ancillary stuff that didn't speak to the kind of people who wanted to be there. I would speak to people who were core

> users from when I was there about it and it seemed like they churned out these really affluent good users for these new users. It was turning into something else.

Joe Reid, former recapper for *Television Without Pity* and current writer for *The Wire*, noted that "in the TL;DR era, that kind of long-form recapping became the exception and not the rule" and that NBCUniversal's purchase of the site resulted in it becoming "just another entertainment portal."[7]

How could a site that saw exponential growth after the Bravo takeover fail to bring in advertising dollars? Cole claims it was likely the quality, not quantity that was to blame:

> That was always a good selling point for the site as far as advertisers and suitors go, was that the usership of the site was high-end spenders, the Volkswagen crowd, not the Nissan crowd, the expensive whiskey crowd, not the Keystone beer crowd. Good consumer tastes and buying habits. Yahoo never took advantage of that. By the time it hit NBC not that many people were interested in advertising on the site because it wasn't reactive enough to sales call, didn't have a great reputation. [8]

The site's demise, though expected by insiders like Cole, was surprising to many. There is almost a misguided belief circulating that if it's on the Internet, it's there forever. Not so with sites owned by mega-corporations. The closure made many writers and journalists think about the place the site had in the zeitgeist. Emily Nussbaum, television critic for *The New Yorker* said that *Television Without Pity* was "the place that opened my eyes to what TV criticism could be"[9] (see Fig. 7.1).

Former *TWoP* reader Margaret Lyons wrote an article for *Vulture* in which she argued "*TWoP* helped create contemporary TV culture as we know it," making the case that it was important in popularizing recaps, now "utterly pervasive across entertainment-based and general-interest sites." Moreover, Lyons argued, it allowed a space in between traditional criticism that demands aesthetic distance and fannish obsession "you could

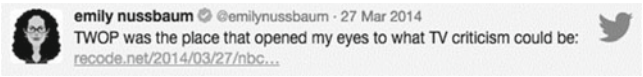

Fig. 7.1 Emily Nussbaum, twitter

watch a lot of *Roswell*, you could *care* about *Roswell*, and you could still think Roswell is dumb garbage."

The first wave of reactions to the closure attempted to position the site as an important aspect of Internet history as well as television history. It was thus further surprising when NBCUniversal declared that the archives of the site would not be available to view. All of the recaps and message board conversations would be lost to the Internet ether. The news came as a shock to many and fans complained about the erasure of the recaps particularly, voicing their concerns on Twitter. Lyons in particular argued that "taking the archives offline is a weird spiritual crime against pop culture," and that "closing it down erases part of TV and internet-culture history"[10] NBCUniversal reversed its original plan after the public outcry, however, and decided that the site would still host all of the recaps, but no longer host or archive the message boards.[11]

Rebirth at Previously.tv and the New Internet

There was nothing like *Television Without Pity*, and nothing to take its place. At the announcement of its closure, many members of the site were wondering where to go. Luckily, in the spring of 2013, the original founders, Tara Ariano, David T. Cole, and Sarah Bunting, launched a new website geared around television criticism called *Previously.tv*. All three had participated in other ventures in the intervening years since their departure. This new site launched with different intentions. In an interview I conducted with Tara Ariano, she recalls that they did not want to recreate *Television Without Pity*, nor did they want to do the same type of blogging that other entertainment sites were doing. The new site is essentially a humor blog about television, with short articles and five-minute podcasts. She claimed, "Everybody does recaps now. We wanted to carve out new territory in TV blogging." *Previously.tv* has a nascent message board community. I asked her why they built message boards into the new site so clearly geared toward smaller-sized articles and mini-discussions about television. She replied,

> There aren't a lot of sites that are doing message boards, They're still pretty uncommon. But Dave has always had an eye on community building and that's his feeling and I agree that bulletin boards are better for that than comments. Comments are so ephemeral, there sort of there on the post and they scroll away and you never need to see them again. Whereas you know,

> the forums abide. You can go back and read the threads from the first episode, when the show first started. So I think that's a better way to make the site more habit forming for users.[12]

Cole's approach to the new site is connected to the idea of amateur everyday discussion of television:

> I think if you go from a 20–page dissertation on an episode down to a 2–3 page thing, it's a different animal. We don't do reviews, necessarily. Just sort of water-cooler talk. We made this decision that we couldn't do the long-form stuff anymore, because, there was a site that did that and they couldn't make it work.[13]

Previously.tv is tweaking the *Television Without Pity* experiment significantly, and the founders are committed to incorporating the lessons learned from the mistakes of the past. This is perhaps most important because many members of the new site were members of the former site. Ariano recalled that when NBCUniversal announced the death of *Television Without Pity*, she learned that there was some discussion in the *TWoP* boards about *Previously.tv* as a place to go when the boards finally shut down. As a result there was an increase in traffic on the new site (according to Cole, over 10,000 members joined the day of the announcement), and there were also plenty of old faces from the *TWoP* days, some with the same usernames. The forums were inundated with all kinds of questions about the "rules" here at the new site. Cole noted that many of these users were scared of being ousted:

> We were talking amongst ourselves in the moderator area and realized a lot of people who joined had a kind of Internet shell shock. They were coming in on tenterhooks, bullied into all this weird behavior. Obviously, between us leaving and when it closed, there was some escalation of rules. I had to tell people that nobody who moderated on *TWoP* moderates here, it's all volunteer, which I think helps a lot. We have about 40 mods, and if they feel burnt out about it, we shift them out for a few months. It doesn't sound we are having nearly as many problems as *TWoP* had.[14]

Not all of the new discussions are positive, however. He notes that there is also another reason so many people are asking about the new rules:

> Most people who are asking about the rules just want to know so they can step right up to the line, because they don't agree with the stance [on a controversial issue]. They want to say terrible things and want to know how

> far they can go before getting in trouble. That's not the vibe we want on the boards.

The new site has some rules, but the founders are going about defining and implementing them in a different way. Cole says, "Everything we come up with, regarding rules, is in the moderator discussion area. That's how we farm policy, insofar as we have strict rules." This, he argues, works better than the large tome of rules users had to learn to post at Bravo's *TWoP*. "We discuss 'how do we communicate this to the user,' instead of a list of ten things you can do and ten things you can't. It's better." He further states, "One thing I learned from moderating the first time around is that rules just beget rules. It sounds like they ended up with a penal code book that was a foot thick by the end. And people just didn't know how to behave."[15]

Not only is there a new approach to moderating the boards, there is also new approach to criticism at *Previously.tv*. Ariano herself no longer considers it satisfying to heap negative criticism on television shows any longer. She said,

> I try not to write about shows I dislike anymore. The new site is, generally speaking, it's more positive. We try not to give too much attention to shows we don't like … It's actually kind of fun, I can't lie about it, it's fun to write about shows that you think are stupid. But, in general I think it's more satisfying to shine the spotlight, if you have one, on shows that you actually think are worth it. [16]

The culture's approach to "snark" has changed. Largely due to the media coverage of trolls and cybermobs, as well as critics like David Denby who decried the term. The trio at *Previously.tv* are aware that *TWoP* had some negative associations. Cole remarked that even before the media coverage over the Sorkin Debacle, the name of the site deterred advertisers, the implication being that the site was full of negativity and snide comments. The new site aims at a more lighthearted, but still critical approach to television.

Conclusion

Though they could not have expected it would do so, founder David T. Cole argues that it humanized an audience that was previously thought of in terms of Nielsen ratings: "When you humanize the people that are watching your

shows, you realize that they watch it the same way you do. You're not treating your audience like an aggregate." The end of *Television Without Pity* was inevitable after its purchase by a major network. "Spare the snark, spoil the network" relied on the idea of the network as a monolithic, powerful force that needed taming. But how can you tame a network if you are part of it? The *TWoP* era had a limited time frame, much like the salons of Europe. Unlike the salons, however, a corporation determined the lifespan of the site. Its size is partly to blame, but also the things that made it attractive at the outset were no longer there: design, moderation style, community. It's memorialization by journalists and bloggers after NBCUniversal announced its closure indicate that it was indeed a one-of-a-kind space where criticism, though harsh, flowed from audiences to authors, and created a supportive space for discussing the role television played in American culture.

Notes

1. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
2. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
3. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
4. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
5. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
6. Pamela Ribon, *Twitter* post, Mar 27 2014, 9:31 am, twitter.com/pamelaribon.
7. Joe Reid, "End of an Internet Era: Television Without Pity Gets Shuttered," *The Wire*, last modified 27 March 2014, accessed 3 April 2014, http://www.thewire.com/entertainment/2014/03/end-of-an-internet-era-television-without-pity-gets-shuttered/359733/
8. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
9. Juliet Lapidos, "The End of Television Without Pity," *The New York Times* online edition, last modified 3 April 2014, accessed 24 April 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/04/opinion/the-end-of-television-without-pity.html?_r=0
10. Margaret Lyons, "How Television Without Pity Shaped Pop Culture," *Vulture,* last modified M 28 March 2014, accessed 28 March 2014, http://www.vulture.com/2014/03/how-television-without-pity-shaped-pop-culture.html
11. Kara Swisher, "After Fan Complaints, NBCU to Keep Television Without Pity and DailyCandy Archives Public," *Re/Code*, last modified 1 April 2014, accessed 24 May 2014, http://recode.net/2014/04/01/after-fan-complaints-nbcu-to-keep-television-without-pity-and-dailycandy-archives-public/

12. Tara Ariano, personal interview with author, July 21 2014.
13. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
14. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
15. David T. Cole, personal interview with author, 3 September 2015.
16. Tara Ariano, personal interview with author, July 21 2014.

Conclusion

Learning from *Television Without Pity*

This project kept growing no matter how much I tried to cap it and declare it "done." In my mind, it still is not done, and new scholarship in fan culture, audience studies, and digital culture will always bring me back to revisit some aspect of life at *Television Without Pity*. One of the aspects of this project I found most fascinating was the connection between "audience sovereignty" in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the contemporary work of audiences to, once again, demand a bigger role (as critic and creator) in their entertainment. An important component of this study is its firm grounding in historical precedents.

In discussing online communities, especially online critics of popular media, there is a tendency to focus on what these "new" kinds of communities will do to challenge our current idea of the audience. Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad is Good For you: How Today' Popular Culture is Actually Making Us Smarter* is one of the more recent texts that seeks to find linear progress in audience interactivity by arguing that new media demands more of its audience, and there is a measurable increase in IQ patterns alongside those demands. But, in examining American audiences as far back as the seventeenth century, I can see a kind of interactivity, purpose, and socio-political connection to entertainment that challenges that this is only a recent occurrence.

I found that early American audiences (like many of their European counterparts) were rowdy, contentious, and often demanded very vocally

S.M. Falero, *Digital Participatory Culture and the TV Audience*,
DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-50000-7

that entertainment meet their immediate intellectual and emotional needs. I also found that industrialization, and the anxieties surrounding class it produced, played a key role in the creation of prescribed roles for author, critic, and audience. Only after industrialization do we begin to see the development of theories surrounding audiences that describe them as passive receivers of entertainment; expected to purchase rather than participate in storytelling. By examining the cultural shift that resulted in the notion of the inherently passive anti-intellectual audience, and connecting the legacy of that shift to contemporary notions of audience, I hope I have shown that a participatory audience is not necessarily a result of technological innovation or advancement of the media industries. If anything, the professionalization of media is precisely when the idea of the mass audience (as dupes or as menace, but always as a pawn in larger schemes) takes hold.

What was happening at *Television Without Pity* that made it different? Why was it discussed differently than fan sites by journalists and authors? I had originally assumed it was the kind of community fostered by the site founders. They appealed to a sarcastic, witty, and refreshingly critical viewer. It was important for me to explore the site itself as a community, to hear the voices of the members, and to ask what they thought about this new way to chat about television. Most of the existing literature on the site, both in journalistic and academic circles, focused on specific television programs and/or a handful of message board threads on the site. I wanted explore how members viewed the site, as a forum for a lot of different communities and spaces for discussion about everything on and around television. To do that, I turned to ethnography.

Ethnographies of online communities have been popular since these communities became visible in the 1990s, but few of them approached the community from an insider perspective, and even fewer stayed with the community for the better part of a decade. I hope this particular project explores elements of online communities that others miss, perhaps especially so for communities organized around media storytelling. Although ethnography has its pitfalls, I hope this study has raised further questions about online communities. My goal at the outset was not to answer questions about what this community was "really" about, but to show how members communicated with one another, what purpose the site had in their lives, and why what they were doing had some discernable impact on their subject.

Henry Jenkins has argued that the "value of ethnography isn't that it allows you access to the this should read: 'real,'" but that "it introduces,

notions of dialogue and accountability."[1] Most scholarly analyses of the site pulled quotes from the message boards and focused primarily on how they connect to the TV text. I did that here, but I also intended to provide a feel for ways in which members talked about television in broader terms, and related their television experiences to social and cultural experiences of their own. I wanted to show that there was more to the site than just a bulletin board for critical statements. There were real people talking to each other about their real lives. That they were using television shows to do so was only one part of why they felt compelled to return to the site, some for years after their favorite show ended. It is easy to distance yourself from people online; they are simply not in your physical space, and your ability to shut them out and not deal with them is exponentially greater. But the more I spent time at *Television Without Pity*, the more I felt there was not just a desire to talk about TV, but to talk to other like-minded individuals about everything. If I had just studied the site in terms of what it does for television, it would have been a useful and interesting topic, but I was also interested in what the site does for its members.

Asking members about their experiences complicates creating a simple definition of the community and its purpose, but it provides for a much richer discussion of how people make web communities part of their lives. In many instances, their engagement with television shows went hand-in-hand with a connection to other members, all with a bit of humor and a lot of talk. This connects deeply with the experience of a fan community, but the kind of anti-fan or perhaps deeply critical fan discussion fostered at *Television Without Pity* impeded any kind of argument that it was a traditional fan culture.

Over the course of the study, I watched as media corporations began to look at critical Internet communities differently. When I began the project, network powerhouse CBS did not have a very interactive website, and was lagging behind the other major networks, each of whom had begun providing message boards for viewers. Today, each network has extensive interactive platforms online, including message boards. Networks have been taking notes on new forms of viewer engagement rather than dismissing them as "fan" fringe elements. Not only are they trying to co-opt these alternative spaces of criticism discreetly, they actively do so via outright ownership. The viewers that participate in these discussions learn that in order to be heard and have a connection to authors, they must embrace corporate values to become visible. This does not mean that

those voices that are ultimately heard today are not critical, however, it does illustrate the serious threat that is posed by an informed, collectively educated group of critics when the conversations that question or challenge the neo-liberal corporate ethos are "disappeared" as I explored in chapters above. Media corporations are desperately trying to incorporate participatory practices into their marketing structure by purchasing sites such as *Television Without Pity*. By providing or co-opting these spaces for discussion, they can manage discussions as well as frame the entire community as a "fan" community, rather than a group of critical media viewers (some of whom happen to be fans).

Limitations of the Study

Even as an insider, I suffered the fate of many Internet researchers: too much data. The large survey of the site is an important factor in what makes this study different from others, but it would have been much more fruitful with a team of ethnographers. I catalogued thousands of pages of message board discussion, and every day a new message board topic was created. Keeping up with the pace of the extensive site was nearly impossible. Some web communities have memberships that number in the thousands, and this one had millions of visitors and hundreds of thousands of members. It was a small city, in a way. A lot of decisions were made in the data gathering stage that would have benefitted from a team's input: whom to contact for interviews, what makes a message board thread worthy of analysis, how much of the 368 pages of *The Sopranos* episode thread should be read, how to interpret italics (just emphasis, or sarcasm?). These are just some of the questions that directed the course of the analysis and had an impact on my conclusions. I tried to do it some kind of patchwork justice, but I would like to think that anyone who spent a good deal of time at *Television Without Pity* would know the daunting prospect of studying such a huge environment. I wish I could encourage others who were members of the site to conduct their own research, and explore the ways different site experiences colored the conclusions about authorship, audience, and power I've arrived at in this work. Sadly, the boards are no longer available for review.

Another regret is that I did not satisfactorily engage fans about my work where they live: in an online message board. Since I was prevented from discussing my work within *Television Without Pity*, it would perhaps have been beneficial to create a separate message board space for discussing the work as it progressed and informing potential interviewees. At the outset,

I did not imagine that it would be a decade-long project, but even if it were planned as a shorter project, a board for discussion with *TWoP* members about my findings might have proven fruitful. Paul Booth argued in 2013 that academics/fans or fan scholars should "be more engaged with fan communities," and that they should "be allowed to enter the academic discourse on fandom more openly."[2] Even though my conversations with members in person and via email was nourishing personally and academically, they were all one-on-one. In hindsight, such an approach would have been especially useful for a community that operated in group discussion, and also had its share of people interested in academic approaches to media.

Ultimately, I am left with as many questions as answers. Blurring lines permeate this work, from the blurred line of my own identity as insider/outsider, to the blurred combination of methods used in analysis, to the blurring of fan/viewer or perhaps audience/critic. Further work needs to be done to examine how web communities are part of the changes in how stories are told in popular media. *Television Without Pity* was a big, new, powerful player in the television industry. It was also a great experiment for television viewers. Though many of the practices on the site were "new" due to the technology required to conduct them, there is a long history of audiences using public spaces to voice their concerns, and asking for their entertainment to reflect their needs. Silenced for much of history of the professionalization of mass media in the United States, the Internet provided audiences with a much-needed space for criticism, and their taking of that space made some creators in the television industry uncomfortable. The discussions in that space show how important the divisions of creator and producer are, primarily to the creators and the industry they depend on. Spaces like these allowed for some incredibly negative criticism, but also for some amazing changes that empowered members and made them feel like they found a community of like-minded critical television viewers.

TWoP was part of a larger trend in media, an early attempt at the democratization of criticism, aided in part by Internet technology. I think what we can learn from *Television Without Pity* is that though freeing in many ways, technology is still very much a commodity. It required funds to maintain a community this vast, and the model that drove *Television Without Pity* into being was not a financially successful one. The viability it had in the television industry was primarily as a *commodity*, as a particular kind of audience that could be delivered to cre-

ators. It did not fit the models that already existed for creators, however. It was not a traditional fan site, where you could count on accolades amongst critique, nor was it an online version of a Nielsen audience. Its value to its members, however, was deeper than any financial profit-and-loss report could show. As a community of fans, anti-fans, or viewer-critics, it was remarkable.

The mainstreaming of fandom and the visibility of fan practices and rituals might seem on the surface to be purely good things. Finally, all the best things about being a fan can be learned and practiced by everybody. Discerning criticism, collaborative analysis, high expectations of creators, emotional investment in the stories that shape our lives, all of these things are cornerstones of fan life. They are a slap in the face to the notion of "couch potatoes" and hypodermic theories of audiences. But, it is important to realize that as corporations began to watch fans, the commodification of fan practices and rituals has recast the fans themselves as simple consumers, forever at the periphery of the media product that "belongs" in the center. As Francesca Coppa has argued,

> If fannish participation is reduced to 'likes,' and 'reblogs,' if technology keeps drawing our attention to official Tumblrs and Twitters and YouTube channels … if all fandom starts to look like Comic-Con, i.e. an industry convention disguised as a fan convention, we run the risk of reducing *all* fans to followers.[3]

Surely, in the wake of trends like transmedia storytelling, creators have embraced fan practices and tried to meet them where they live, but they have also been taking over fan practices, and investing heavily in buying where they live.[4] *Television Without Pity* was one of those spaces where fans and critical viewers lived. NBCUniversal's purchase of the site and its renovation was essentially to serve the purpose of bringing more consumers to their properties, but because their approach ignored the community there, they alienated the very kind of viewer that flocked there in the early 2000s. That, along with other things, led to the demise of *Television Without Pity*, and nothing on the same level has taken its place.

Notes

1. Henry Jenkins, "Excerpts from 'Matt Hills Interviews Henry Jenkins'" in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, (New York: New York University Press, 2006): 31.
2. Paul Booth, "Augmenting Fan/Academic Dialogue: New Directions in Fan Research," *Journal of Fandom Studies*, v. 1, no. 2, (October 2013), last accessed 10 November 2012, DOI: 10.1286/jfs.1.2.11.9_1.
3. Francesca Coppa, "Fuck Yeah, Fandom Is Beautiful," *Journal of Fandom Studies*, v.2 no. 1 (2014): 80.
4. Jason Mittell, "Strategies of Storytelling on Transmedia Television," in *Storyworlds Across Media: Toward a Media-Conscious Narratology*, Marie-Laurie Ryan and Jan-Noel Thon, eds. (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2014): 254–256.

Appendix

Survey and Interview Questions

Surveys were conducted using online software. The following questions, in addition to demographic information requests, were prompted to interviewees. The questions were anonymous, but there was an option at the end of the survey to provide contact information for one-on-one interviews. Interview questions were generally attempts to elicit further information about their responses to the initial survey.

1. Where do you access *TWoP* most? ☐Home ☐Work ☐School ☐Other:
2. How long have you been a member of *TWoP*?
3. Do you visit the site mostly to read the recaps, the message boards, or both?
4. How often do you post in the message boards?
5. Which boards do you post in most often?
6. What attracted you to the message boards at *TWOP*?
7. Do you like the site's policies regarding the moderation of message boards?
8. Do you like the site's rules for message board posts (proper spelling, polite conduct)?
9. Do you ever read/post in other TV-related message boards?
10. Do you feel that the message boards at *TWoP* have an impact on television programs? Why/Why not?

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11. Have you ever posted in a message board in which a television show creator (actor, director, writer, etc.) entered the conversation? What happened?
12. What do you like and/or dislike about the community of posters at *TWoP*?

Interviewee Statistics

32 respondents

97 percent female, 3 percent male

74 percent held middle-class jobs earning an average of US$50 k/year

26 percent held working class jobs, earning an average of US$15 k/year.

100 percent of respondents were college-educated

33 percent held, or were working toward, graduate degrees

88 percent identified as politically "liberal"

12 percent identified as "very liberal or radical."

All of the members who responded to my online survey had been members of the *TWoP* community for over five years and participated regularly in a variety of message boards. Only one respondent had a specific genre of programming she discussed on the site, only visiting "reality show" message boards.

List of Message Boards Visited Most Frequently for the Study, 2000–2010

Table A.1 Message boards visited most frequently for the study, 2000–2010

Television program topics
24
African American Lives
The Amazing Race
Angel
Bones
Breaking Bad
Buffy the Vampire Slayer
Charmed
CSI: Crime Scene Investigation
The Daily Show
Desperate Housewives

Television program topics

Dexter
ER
Firefly
Frasier
Friends
The Golden Girls
Grey's Anatomy
Heroes
House Hunters
How I Met Your Mother
Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D List
The L Word
L.A. Ink
Law & Order: SVU
Lost
Mad Men
My Name is Earl
The O.C.
The Office
The Real World (multiple seasons)
Rescue Me
Roseanne
Scrubs
Sex and the City
Smallville
The Sopranos
South Park
Star Trek: Enterprise
Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip
True Blood
Veronica Mars
The West Wing
The X-Files

Television cultural topics

The Business Side of PBS
Commercials
The Future of TV
Gay/Bi/Straight: Sexuality on TV
Gender on Television
The Industry
Network Interference

Television cultural topics
New Rules for TV
Nielsen Families
Online Viewing
The Race Card: Ethnicity on TV
The Sitcom Survival Guide
School Life on TV
Shows You Hate (But Watch Anyway)
TV as a Group Experience
TV Budgets
TV Characters' Jobs
TV Fanfic
TV Made Me Do It
You Can't Do That! Censorship on TV

Television without pity community topics
Announcement from the Founders
Bravo Deal
Shoutouts
The Troll Patrol
TWoP Cons
TWoP Forum Dos and Don'ts
TWoP Media Sightings

Television Without Pity Site-wide Statistics

Major Program Topics 2000–2010

Table A.2 Major Program Topics

158 Major Program Topics 2000–2010							
1	24	41	Dollhouse	81	Kitchen Nightmares	121	Rome
2	30 Rock	42	Ed	82	Las Vegas	122	Roswell
3	7th Heaven	43	Enterprise	83	Launch My Line	123	Samantha Who?
4	90201	44	ER	84	Law & Order: Special Victims Unit	124	Scrubs
5	Alias	45	Eureka	85	Life on Mars	125	Sex and the City

158 Major Program Topics 2000–2010

6	Ally McBeal	46	Everwood	86	Lost	126	Shear Genius
7	The Amazing Race	47	The Event	87	The Lyon's Den	127	Six Feet Under
8	America's Next Top Model	48	Farscape	88	Mad Men	128	Smallville
9	American Idol	49	The Fashion Show	89	Make Me a Supermodel	129	So You Think You Can Dance
10	Angel	50	Fastlane	90	Making the Band	130	Sons of Anarchy
11	The Apprentice	51	Felicity	91	MDs	131	The Sopranos
12	The Bachelor	52	Firefly	92	Melrose Place	132	Sports Night
13	Band of Brothers	53	Flash Forward	93	Miss Match	133	The $treet
14	Battlestar Galactica	54	Freaks and Geeks	94	The Mole	134	Step It Up and Dance
15	Big Brother	55	Freakylinks	95	My Name is Earl	135	Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip
16	Big Love	56	Friday Night Lights	96	My So-Called Life	136	Stylista
17	The Biggest Loser	57	Fringe	97	Nurse Jackie	137	Supernatural
18	Birds of Prey	58	The Fugitive	98	NYPD Blue	138	The Sureal Life
19	Boardwalk Empire	59	Gideon's Crossing	99	The O.C.	139	Survivor
20	Boomtown	60	Gilmore Girls	100	The Office	140	Tarzan
21	Boston Public	61	Girls Club	101	Once and Again	141	Temptation Island
22	Breaking Bad	62	Glee	102	One Tree Hill	142	Terminator: the Sarah Connor Chronicles
23	Brothers and Sisters	63	Gossip Girl	103	The Osbournes	143	Third Watch
24	Buffy the Vampire Slayer	64	Grey's Anatomy	104	Oz	144	Titans
25	Burn Notice	65	Grosse Pointe	105	Pasadena	145	Top Chef
26	C.S.I.: Crime Scene Investigation	66	Hell's Kitchen	106	Popstars	146	Trading Spaces
27	C.S.I. Miami	67	Heroes	107	Popular	147	Tru Calling
28	Caprica	68	The Hllls	108	The Practice	148	True Blood
29	Carnivale	69	House	109	Prison Break	149	Ugly Betty
30	Charmed	70	How I Met Your Mother	110	Private Practice	150	Undeclared
31	Chuck	71	Hung	111	Project Runway	151	V

158 Major Program Topics 2000–2010

32	The Contender	72	I Love Money	112	Push, Nevada	152	The Vampire Diaries
33	Dancing With the Stars	73	Jake 2.0	113	Pushing Daisies	153	Veronica Mars
34	Dark Angel	74	Jericho	114	Queer as Folk, U.S.	154	Weeds
35	Dawson's Creek	75	Joan of Arcadia	115	The Real World	155	The West Wing
36	Deadwood	76	Joe Millionaire	116	The Real World/Road Rules Challenge	156	The Wire
37	Desperate Housewives	77	John Doe	117	Reaper	157	The X-Files
38	Dexter	78	Karen Sisco	118	Road Rules	158	WWF Smackdown
39	Dirty Sexy Money	79	Kathy Griffin: My Life on the D-List	119	Rock of Love		
40	Doctor Who	80	Kid Nation	120	Rock Star		

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